FOREWORD

The Department of Veterans Affairs is committed to functioning as a unified department providing *One VA* customer service to our nation's veterans and their beneficiaries. The effective and efficient use of current and emerging technology in support of VA's business operations will ensure that we meet the *One VA* goal. VA's Strategic Plan incorporates a commitment to design an Information Technology Architecture that will integrate all IT issues and opportunities throughout that relate directly to customer service.

To guide the operational, tactical, budget and capital planning for all future information technology initiatives for the entire department, a vision for employing technology has been developed. This document contains that Vision. There are twenty-one concepts in the Vision that frame the direction we should follow when implementing VA information systems.

The concepts embodied in this Vision, though a significant challenge to implement, have been supported by all who participated in their definition as well as the members of VA's Chief Information Officers Council. With few exceptions, VA does not need to start from scratch to implement the Vision concepts. We can leverage current systems and modernization initiatives to the maximum extent, being always mindful of ensuring convergence towards the Vision even as it must change over time to adapt to changes in VA's business environment.

Just establishing an IT Vision is not enough. We must now collectively design the best way to implement the Vision. It is necessary that we build the plans and develop the IT architecture model and standards that will guide us in implementing the Vision over the next several years. I fully endorse the IT Vision and ask that you too embrace the Vision as we move forward to make *One VA* customer service a reality.

Harold F. Gracey, Jr.
Acting Assistant Secretary for
Information and Technology
March 1999

EXHIBITS

Number   **Page**

BACKGROUND

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) realizes that, to improve the overall level of service to the nation's 26 million veterans, it needs to increase the level of integration of its multiple lines of business. "*One VA* for Customer Service" serves as the theme and goal of this integration initiative. It is widely believed that modern and emerging information technology is the primary enabler to achieving a more unified customer service goal. Traditionally, VA has used information technology to automate processes within lines of business, but not across them. The *One VA* goal enjoins all VA lines of business to look outside themselves, to share and exchange information as they have not done in the past, to improve overall service to their common customer, veterans and their families.

THE NEED

The Veteran-centered Information Technology (IT) Vision and Architecture initiative responds to a need: the customer's expectation and desire to receive full-service treatment whenever he or she interacts with a particular VA entity. Veterans think of VA as *one* organization that offers many different benefits and services. When they interact with VA, too often they are surprised to discover it behaves like several distinct organizations. As *one* organization, they expect that no matter which part of VA they contact, they should receive fast and accurate answers to all their questions, even if VA must access the systems of other government organizations. Instead, veterans are often pointed from one part of VA to another to obtain the help or information they seek. On each leg of this journey they can be asked to identify themselves, offer evidence of their veteran status, and establish their eligibility for benefits. This happens because each VA business line has its own information system and uses it to keep separate records of basic veteran data and the transactions it conducts with the veteran. Veteran data is generally not synchronized between two systems, and rarely can the same VA professional gain access to any other system than his or her primary one. The repetitive process of reestablishing one's basic veteran status and eligibility, and the sometimes circuitous customer service route that customers must follow have led to frustration on their part, delays in receipt of benefits for which they truly qualify and genuinely need, and substantial re-work by VA staff.

PURPOSE

The Veteran-centered Information Technology (IT) Vision and Architecture initiative is focused on solutions, not problems. The road to the right solution begins with a jointly held, widely supported vision of an end-state in which information technology is effectively supporting a set of well-defined functional capabilities that, taken together, define the environment of integrated customer service at VA – *One VA*. It will serve as the foundation for defining specific, technical IT architectures and execution plans to implement them. Management will use it as a tool for coordinating and prioritizing IT-related customer service investments. When fully implemented, the veteran-centered IT Vision and Architecture will enable VA and its customers, our nation's veterans and their families, to realize all the benefits of an integrated VA customer service

environment. The emphasis of the IT Vision is on effectiveness. And although the realization of the described vision will require investment of resources, with IT-enhanced customer services, a net long-term cost savings is expected to result. Savings will come from more rapid processing of claims, far less re-work, and nearly immediate access to customer data of all kinds needed by VA professionals in every line of business, regardless of its physical location when they request it. However, the first and driving objective of the *One VA* initiative is to improve customer service.

ONE VA

Although we define the concept of "*One VA* for Customer Service" from two perspectives, they are mutually supportive.

Customer's Perspective: *With just a single access to VA, customers receive general information about all VA benefits and services and how to apply for them, and they exchange information with VA that relates to their specific eligibility determination, award determination, and receipt and use of any VA benefit or service. Subsequent to that initial access, in cases where the customer must or desires to interact directly with a VA functional specialist (e.g., nurse, physician, vocational rehabilitation counselor, claims adjudicator, appeals lawyer), the single access veteran service representative can quickly transfer the customer to an appropriate specialist. Customers have the option to use an automated VA self-service capability to acquire many of the same services provided by single-access veteran service representatives.*

Internal VA Perspective: *For the purpose of improving the quality of service to veterans, VA business lines and their external partners maximize the sharing of communications assets, information processing assets, and customer-specific information. Together, they plan, design, develop, and implement business processes, procedures, and supporting information systems that efficiently and effectively integrate their operations, using these shared assets to enable robust, single-access customer service wherever appropriate.*

THE VISION

The Vision of *One VA* is expressed as a set of 21 IT-enhanced, functional capabilities or concepts, each of which contributes in a coordinated way to an environment of integrated customer service. These capabilities serve as the primary set of integrated customer service requirements that information technology is expected to help satisfy. They fall into six categories: 1) Customer Service, 2) Customer Self-service, 3) Internal Data Sharing and Exchange, 4) External Data Sharing and Exchange – Federal Government, and 5) External Data Sharing and Exchange – Non-Federal Government, and 6) Customer Outreach and Feedback. The main body of the Vision document elaborates on each of the *One VA* Vision concepts that follow.

Customer Service

1. *Telephone-based, One VA Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs).* Accessed through national and regional automated call distribution systems, well-trained Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs) operating in regional customer service centers provide first-level, telephone-based services to veterans and their families that span all VA lines of business.

2. *Common CSE Graphical User Interface.* As part of VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE), VSRs use a common, graphical user interface (GUI) as their dominant tool for gaining access to the information they need from a host of production systems in order to provide real-time, first-level customer response.

3. *Gateway-resident CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine.* As part of the VA CSE, a gateway-resident transaction broker and interface engine mediates real-time queries and real-time or delayed updates (initiated from the common CSE GUI) of the relevant VA production databases or replications of them.

4. *Expert System for Determination of Potential Benefits Eligibility.* VSRs and claims adjudicators use an automated eligibility determination expert system to help them determine a customer's *potential* eligibility for any or all VA benefits and services. The system automatically matches the customer's profile with the statutory eligibility rules of each benefit program or service.

5. *Internet E-mail between Customers and VA.* VA provides its customers the opportunity to communicate with VSRs and functional specialists, including primary care health care providers, through Internet-based electronic mail. Functional specialists control the distribution of their own e-mail addresses.

Customer Self-service

6. *Telephone-based Self-service.* Customers and VSOs can call a single toll-free number to gain access to a range of telephone-based self-service transactions enabled by VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

7. *Internet-based Self-service.* Customers or VSOs can use a personal computer from home, from a public building, or from a VSO office and, with verifiable identification, gain access to VA self-service transactions through the Internet that are supported by the CSE, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

8. *Dynamic Fact-based Approach and Digital Certificates for Authentication of Self-service Users.* Identification and authentication of veterans requesting access to veteran-confidential self-service transactions is accomplished for both telephone and Internet access through a dynamic fact-based approach, and supplemented with digital certificate technology for Internet access.

Internal Data Sharing and Exchange

9.   *Authoritative Copy of Record for Customer ID Data.* A single VA production system maintains the authoritative copy of record of all veteran identification and basic eligibility determination data that is needed by multiple lines of business. A software module in the CSE automatically ensures that the authoritative copy of record and all full or partial copies of it that are maintained by other VA systems are kept in sync.

10.   *Fully Compatible, Interoperable E-mail within VA.* All organizations of VA and its partners can readily send and receive secure electronic mail to/from each other, including attachments of compound documents containing any type of data.

11.   *Electronic Imaging, Indexed Storage and VA-wide Retrieval On Demand of Claims Folders and Medical Records.* For all active healthcare patients and benefits claimants, VA routinely creates scanned images of any hardcopy medical records and all documents that support their claims and health care, indexing and storing them for fast electronic dissemination and retrieval on demand by authorized VA professionals, VSOs, or customers.

12.   *Widespread Use of Video-Conferencing.* Every VA facility is equipped with interoperable and compatible, conference style and/or desktop video-conferencing technology, making substantial use of this technology for geographically remote clinical consultations and patient examinations (telemedicine), and to conduct meetings and hearings related to claims adjudication and appeal.

13.   *Workflow Automation for Process Integration and Standardization.* VA uses network-based, interoperable, and compatible workflow automation software to manage the interdependent activities of standard, high volume, customer service processes (e.g., claims and appeals processing, common clinical procedures).

14.   *Complete Data Communications Connectivity and Interoperability.* The VA data communications infrastructure of its WAN and all LANs enables complete VA-wide connectivity and interoperability, providing seamless transport of all types of data among all its processing platforms.

External Data Sharing and Exchange - Federal Government

15.   *Robust Electronic Exchange of Veteran Personnel and Medical Data with DoD.* VA electronically acquires from DoD, both on demand and through rule-based dissemination a) the fully automated medical records of all veterans who become patients in the VA healthcare system, records that conform to a standard format used by DoD and VA, and b) all personnel data about veterans and their dependents that is pertinent to qualifying and servicing them as VA customers.

16.   *Routine Electronic Data Exchange with Other Government Agencies.* VA professionals conduct interactive sessions with other government agency servers to assist individual customers in real time, and VA servers routinely communicate with servers of other government agencies,

interchanging large data files to make automated adjustments to veteran data maintained by VA's benefit delivery systems.

17. *Automated Customer Income Verification.* Manual income verification processes are replaced with inter-agency sharing of veterans' income data and benefit adjustments are automatically and retroactively applied.

External Data Sharing and Exchange - Non-Federal Government

18. *Direct Deposit of All Customer Benefit Payments.* VA uses electronic funds transfer technology to directly deposit monetary entitlements into the bank accounts of every qualifying veteran and veteran's dependents.

19. *Paperless Data Exchange with Commercial Partners.* In its business dealings with all commercial partners who provide benefits and services to VA customers on VA's behalf, VA exchanges all data electronically.

Customer Outreach and Feedback

20. *WWW for Customer Outreach.* VA uses the World Wide Web (WWW) as one method of information dissemination to the general veteran population.

21. *Built-in Customer Feedback Mechanisms.* VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE) has built-in customer feedback mechanisms that veterans and VSO representatives use to express their likes and dislikes about the actual delivery of benefits and services as well as the assistance they received from VA to obtain them. The data collected is fed to a customer complaint tracking and follow-up system.

STUDY APPROACH

The study team's approach to developing the Veteran-centered IT Vision and Architecture hinges on the premise that information technology is a tool to support and enable enhanced functional capabilities. To identify the enhancements to functional capabilities that would enable *One VA* customer service, a project team of independent, outside consultants began by reviewing VA corporate and administration specific strategic plans, and several recent studies of VA operations commissioned by federal oversight agencies. To understand customer desires, the team reviewed reports documenting recent customer focus group meetings and customer satisfaction surveys. Turning towards a determination of the enhancements themselves, and initiating a process that would result in wide support for a shared vision, the consultants conducted 28 formal interviews of VA managers who represented a broad cross section of VA business lines and field operations. They also interviewed the Chief of the Veterans Affairs Branch of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). During the interview period, they visited eight representative field sites, observing operations and informally interviewing functional staff. Combining its own expertise in information technology with the ideas and understanding acquired through this process, the project team published an early draft of the Vision document approximately halfway through the interview period, followed by a more

complete draft after conducting the last interview. The second draft was the subject of two management workshops and one workshop for VA technical architects. Workshop participants represented the same cross section of VA as the interviewees. Many of the interviewees participated in the workshops; others who were not formally interviewed also participated. Finally, the project team and its VACO sponsors briefed representatives of 17 different veteran service organizations (VSOs) on all concepts of the Vision. It was well received. After incorporating comments and suggestions by workshop participants and VSO representatives, the final draft was published and coordinated for review by VA executives and approval by the Office of the Secretary.

STAKEHOLDERS

The *One VA* Vision described in this document is entirely customer oriented. With that in mind, it was important to know who the customers are and what they want from VA in terms of enhanced service before formulating a suitable vision. Although veterans and their families are VA's primary customers, there are many others who have a stake in the improved customer service to veterans. They include Congress and OMB, whose oversight of VA is central to its fundamental ability to offer benefits and services to veterans. Veteran service organizations (VSOs) are a very important stakeholder; the Vision enhances their key role as VA's partner in veteran service. Other key stakeholders are private industry and educational institutions who, on behalf of VA, deliver services to veterans directly. VA needs the cooperation of other government agencies in order to deliver its benefits and services in a cost-effective manner. Additionally, state and local Veterans Affairs offices also deliver veterans benefits, and the veteran would benefit from a stronger partnership between them and VA. These latter stakeholders are VA's partners in service to the same principal customer: veterans and their families.

THE CUSTOMER

Most people think of veterans as individuals who served their country at one time in the armed forces of the United States. However, customers of Veterans Affairs can be active duty personnel as well. While on active duty they qualify for some significant VA-provided benefits to include education benefits of the Montgomery GI Bill, loan guarantees, and life insurance. Moreover, it is while on active duty that they may suffer the disabling injuries or illnesses that qualify them for VA disability compensation benefits. VA needs the disability information as soon as it is diagnosed as disabling or potentially disabling. Hence, the customers for VA benefits and services are not only the 26 million living men and women (and their families) who have been honorably discharged from the uniformed services; they are potentially all active duty personnel as well.

CUSTOMER DEMOGRAPHICS AND USE OF VA PROGRAMS

Listed below is non-active duty veterans demographic information that has implications for the Vision. The implementation of the Vision must accommodate these customers, taking into consideration their numbers and their capabilities, especially pertaining to their interaction with self-service information technology. As this table shows, the bulk of the veteran population is over the age of 40, is pretty well educated overall, and given there are approximately 26 million veterans today, the total veteran population by the year 2010 is projected to be about 4 million less.

Exhibit 1-1. Veteran Demographic Data.

Veteran Demographic Data (Active Duty Personnel not included)		
Category	**Sub-Category**	**Count[1]**
Age	Number of veterans age 19 and below	1
	Number of veterans age 20-29	1,079
	Number of veterans age 30-39	2,750
	Number of veterans age 40-49	5,204
	Number of veterans age 50-59	5,133
	Number of veterans age 60-69	5,722
	Number of veterans age 70 and above	5,992
Education	Average years of education – all veterans	13.1
	Average years of education – veterans age 20-39	13.2
	Average years of education – veterans age 40-plus	13.6
	% of veteran population with college degrees	22.2
Changes to Veteran Population	Number of new veterans projected, 1997-2010	2,800
	Number of veteran deaths projected, 1997-2010	6,900

Exhibit 1-2 presents the statistics about the use veterans made of the various VA benefits and services in the year 1996. It gives us a reasonable estimate of the relative magnitude of the actual customer base for each VA line of business.

Exhibit 1-2. Projected Program Participation (FY99)

Program	**Category**	**No. Participants[2]**
Medical Care	Unique Patients	3,172
Compensation	Veterans	2,320
	Survivors	308
Pension	Veterans	403
	Survivors	289
Education	Veterans and Servicepersons	283
	Reservists	77
	Survivors/Dependents	46
Vocational Rehabilitation	Veterans	54
Loan Guaranty	Loans Guaranteed	222
Insurance	Administered Policies in Force	2,300
	Supervised Policies in Force	2,465
National Cemetery System	Interments	80
	Occupied Graves Maintained	2,326
	Headstones and Markers	336

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[1] Individual veteran counts in thousands (,000) (Source: *Annual Report of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Fiscal Year 1996)*

[2] Individual participant counts in thousands (,000) (Source: *FY 1999 Budget Submission to the Office of Management and Budget*)

VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

A variety of available documents was analyzed to learn and understand the customer service improvements veterans want from VA. These included customer surveys, focus groups results, environmental scans, NCS customer comment cards, patient representative complaint and compliment tracking, and hotline issue reports. The detailed findings of the analysis are at Appendix F. To summarize these findings, the veteran and veteran families want timely, accurate, convenient, and coordinated service from VA. As those general, customer needs apply to the context of this study, veterans translate them into the following VA specific desires and expectations.

The VA customer requests:

- Information and involvement in all matters involving personal health care and benefits
- 24 hour per day/7 day per week service

- One-stop service that is coordinated by a well-informed and courteous service representative or primary care health provider

- Clear and understandable explanations of all benefits and services, including eligibility requirements, application procedures, and VA policies, procedures, and decisions

- Awareness of personal eligibility for all benefits

- To be kept well informed and notified of any benefit or eligibility changes

- Timely service as a priority, especially in the areas of compensation & pension, appeals and telephone response

- Immediate status information regarding claims, check payment, appeal, anticipated completion dates, delays or changes in the claims process, approval or denial status

- Family involvement in the health care process, including being informed of all care progress and decisions

- Timely and geographically convenient specialty care

- A streamlined automated health care appointment and registration process that is convenient for the veteran

- Medical examinations that are complete and adequate to support medical care and benefit eligibility

- Uninterrupted treatment when transferred from an inpatient to outpatient status

- Rapid and direct access by VA to needed records

- Coordination of medical records, income information, and military status among government agencies

- Quality control measures to assure the accuracy of gravesite inscriptions, records of earnings, income status, veteran status, and payments

- VA documents and forms that are automated and electronically accessible on an immediate basis and that efficiently guide veterans through the forms completion process

- A veteran identification system that eliminates the need to prove and re-prove veteran status

- Acknowledgement by VA of receipt of correspondence and documents

- Same day service

- Information and education about healthcare (patient education and prevention)

Taken together, the customer service improvements reflected in the Vision and those that are being pursued by individual VA business lines should respond well to these desires expressed by the customer.

What drives the need for the *One VA* IT Vision and Architecture? In short, it is the customer's expectation and desire to receive full-service treatment whenever he or she interacts with a particular VA entity.

VA operates for the most part as a loose confederation of relatively independent business lines. In the main, these are: 1) health care services managed by VHA, 2) a set of entitlement programs managed by VBA that provide monetary benefits to eligible veterans and their families, and 3) cemetery services managed by NCS. A vast network of 173 medical centers, 398 outpatient clinics of several types, and 133 nursing homes deliver health care. Health care consists of multiple services. It accounts for approximately half of VA's $40 billion annual budget. The bulk of the remaining budget is used to fund entitlement or benefits programs managed by VBA in five relatively distinct business lines: a) Compensation and Pension Services, b) Education Services, c) Insurance Services, d) Loan Guaranty Services, and e) Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Services. A small percentage of the VA budget supports NCS operations to provide burial services at 113 national cemeteries, and headstones and markers for veterans' graves at national or other cemeteries.

Veterans are generally unconcerned with how VA organizes internally to conduct operations. They think of VA as *one* organization that offers many different benefits and services. When they interact with VA, too often they are surprised to discover it behaves like several distinct organizations. As *one* organization, they expect that no matter which part of VA they contact, they should receive fast and accurate answers to all their questions, even if VA must access the systems of other government organizations to get them. Instead, veterans are often pointed from one part of VA to another to obtain the help or information they seek. On each leg of this journey they can be asked to identify themselves, offer evidence of their veteran status, and establish their eligibility for benefits. This happens because each VA business line has its own information system and uses it to keep separate records of basic veteran data and the transactions it conducts with the veteran. Rarely is veteran data synchronized between two systems, and rarely can the same VA professional gain access to any other system than his or her primary one. The repetitive process of reestablishing one's basic veteran status and eligibility, and the circuitous customer service route that too many customers must follow have produced significant customer frustration, delays in veterans' receipt of benefits for which they truly qualify and genuinely need, and substantial re-work by VA staff.

Interviews of senior VA executives conducted as part of the effort to develop the IT Vision go into some detail in describing the effects of the lack of integrated customer management. The documented interviews, confirmed by the interviewees, are included as a standalone annex to the vision. A review of this annex along with Appendix F, Voice of the Customer, provide a rich view of the general and specific challenges that lie ahead as VA moves to a more integrated customer service environment. Implementation of the functional capabilities of the Vision should establish the reality, as well as the customer perception, of *One VA*. With it will come significant improvements in customer service and in operational efficiency and effectiveness.

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The Vision of *One VA* for customer service is expressed in this chapter as a set of capabilities (functional and technology-related) that are needed to better serve veterans and their families in a more integrated manner. The VA managers who were interviewed in connection with establishing the Vision were all asked the question, What does "*One VA* for Customer Service" mean to you? Two views of *One VA* emerged, the customer view and the internal VA view. Their definitions were presented in the Executive Summary. The key terms used in the two definitions are explained in detail in Appendix C.

The envisioned capabilities can be thought of as the primary set of requirements for a *One VA* approach to customer service that information technology is expected to help satisfy. They fall into six main categories: 1) Customer Service, 2) Customer Self-service, 3) Internal Data Sharing and Exchange, 4) External Data Sharing and Exchange – Federal Government, 5) External Data Sharing and Exchange – Non-Federal Government, and 6) Customer Outreach and Feedback. This chapter presents each major capability or concept by category, giving each a title and single sentence definition. They are described as if the capabilities have already become part of the operational landscape of VA, i.e., we reached that future place and we're describing what it's like. For most of the described capabilities, their definitions are enhanced with subordinate capabilities and qualifications that further clarify the operational aspect of the end state in view.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

This category includes the concepts and capabilities delivered in person-to-person interaction, normally over the telephone but sometimes face-to-face. The VA professional would make use of these IT-enhanced capabilities to deliver improved, integrated customer service.

1.   Telephone-based, *One VA* Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs). *Accessed through national and regional automated call distribution systems, well-trained Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs) operating in regional customer service centers provide first-level, telephone-based services to veterans and their families that span all VA lines of business.* Exhibit 3-1 depicts a VSR team operating in an automated telephone response and call distribution environment described below.

▪ A customer gains immediate access to a VSR through a national toll-free number advertised in the blue pages of all municipal telephone books and the worldwide web (WWW).

▪ VA makes other toll-free numbers available for services delivered by VA functional specialists, providing the numbers directly to customers who are actively using those services. It does not advertise the specialized numbers in the telephone book blue pages.

▪ When using the nationally advertised toll-free number, the national call distribution system routes the call to one of the VSR-staffed regional customer service centers. Call distribution

is based on the telephone area code of the caller's location and/or on a dynamically adjustable rule or algorithm, which is manually or automatically adjusted to balance workload among the customer service centers.

- The automated response system (ARS) at the regional center prompts callers to use either the touch tone buttons on their phones or their voices to select whether they wish to speak to a VSR or use self-service options. If they choose to speak to a VSR, the system finds a non-busy VSR telephone and routes the call there. If all VSRs at that customer service center are busy, the system routes the call to another center until it finds a non-busy VSR, resulting in a near-zero blocked or abandoned call rate across the system. If a VSR is not immediately available, the ARS indicates to the caller the average wait time and prompts the caller, while waiting, to enter certain types of data as appropriate.

- Whenever assistance to the veteran requires it, a VSR can easily execute a "warm transfer" of the call to a VA functional specialist, e.g., a doctor or nurse, a claims adjudicator, a life insurance specialist, etc. The customer may identify the specialists by name if they have an ongoing service relationship with them. Whether or not named by the customer, the VSR attempts to contact the appropriate specialist by phone and does not actually transfer the customer to him or her until direct telephone contact has been made, i.e., the "warm" transfer. If it cannot be made at that time, the VSR arranges for a time when it can be made and, if need be, coordinates the call to ensure actual contact is made with the appropriate VA professional.

- VSRs are equipped to execute a warm transfer of a customer's call to the appropriate offices of other Federal agencies (e.g., SSA, Medicare) for which callers most often mistake VA as being the appropriate agency to call. They can also warm transfer to state or local veterans affairs offices.

- The ARS is bilingual (English and Spanish), and bilingual VSRs are available. Initial prompts by the ARS allow the caller to choose to interact with the ARS in the caller's language of choice. The ARS at the regional customer service center will first attempt to route the call to a VSR who speaks the language of choice.

- If a customer asks to speak to a VSR by name, the VSR first contacted can transfer the call to the named VSR. If the named VSR is busy, the first-contacted VSR would offer to help the customer, or he/she would enable the customer to leave a voice-mail message for the named VSR.

- In addition to reacting to customer calls requesting information or service, VSRs proactively work with customers when they call or through telephone-based outreach activities, helping them understand their potential eligibility for services or benefits they don't currently receive, and how to apply for them.

- Interacting with customers on the telephone, VSRs use the Customer Service Environment (CSE) (see concept #2 and Exhibit 3-2) to fill out applications for VA benefits or services and guide them through the claim development process.

- If electronically "tickled" by the CSE, the VSR will proactively follow up with customers whose own "offline" actions related to a claim have passed the expected completion date. VSRs also follow up with customers whenever the VSR must collect information offline that requires more time than is reasonable to keep a caller on hold.

Automated Call Distribution Systems Manage Access to VSRs

Automated call distribution systems give customer access to available veteran service representatives (VSRs) through a national toll-free number to provide telephone-based customer service to veterans across all lines of business. Users utilize the customer service environment (CSE) to access information in VA production systems needed to deliver responsive customer service. Call center "regions" are notional - their number and location is to be determined.
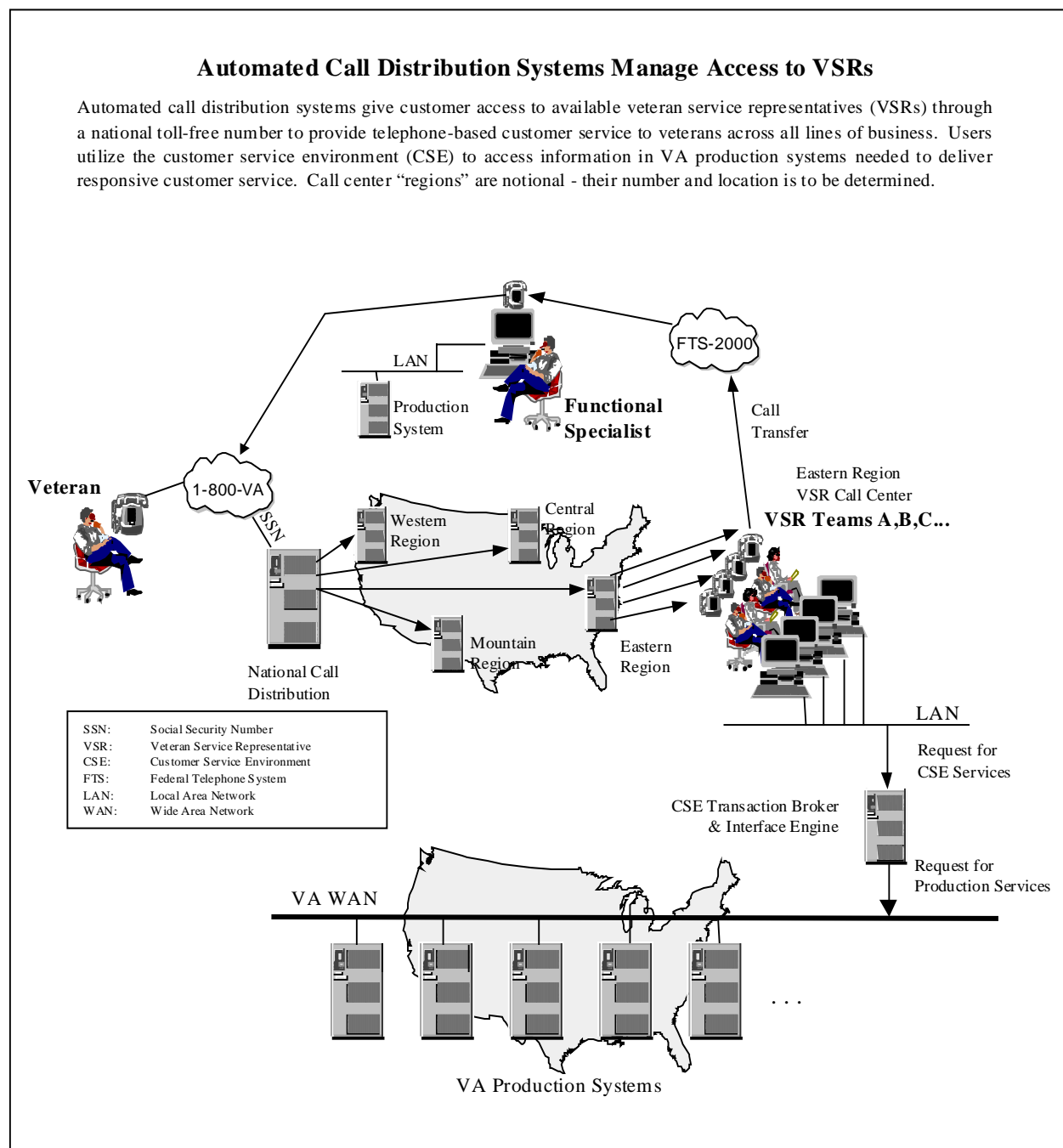

Exhibit 3-1. Automated Call Distribution Systems

- VSR services are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, excepting federal holidays.

- The telephone system used at the customer service centers enables VSR supervisors or service center quality assurance personnel to monitor non-disruptively and selectively the conversations between VSRs and customers to manage consistent quality of service, especially for inexperienced VSRs.

2.   Common CSE Graphical User Interface. As part of VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE), VSRs use a common, graphical user interface (GUI) as their dominant tool for gaining access to the information they need from a host of production systems in order to provide real-time, first-level customer response.

- VSRs or anyone authorized by VA to access the CSE uses the common CSE GUI to provide services to the veteran that relate to all VA business lines.

- Transactions that can be performed through the CSE GUI are limited to those authorized by the various VA business lines at a given point in time. Business line managers add or remove transaction types from the CSE GUI at their discretion. A candidate list includes the following transaction types:

  - Processing of applications for all VA benefits and services
  - Processing of a "what if" benefit eligibility determination for the customer prior to customer's submission of a formal claim for benefits
  - Reporting of current status of any claim
  - Reporting of current status of any appeal
  - Change of customer's name
  - Change of customer's address(es)
  - Change of customer's marital status
  - Change of customer's dependent status
  - Change of customer's income
  - Change of customer's direct deposit bank account number
  - Change in status or name of customer's power of attorney representation
  - Change in information related to the customer's life insurance policy
  - Reporting of customer's debt balance to VA and status of debt payments
  - Processing of customer's application for insurance-based loan
  - Reporting of status or record of customer's insurance-based loan payments
  - Reporting of customer's balance of insurance-based loan
  - Change in customer's status as Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) student
  - Reporting of customer's remaining MGIB benefit
  - Submission of confirmation of customer's continued enrollment in education program financed by GI Bill
  - Reporting of the status of current or pending benefit payments to the customer (date, amount)
  - Reporting of the history of all types of benefit payments made to the customer
  - Recording of a notice of death of an existing beneficiary of VA benefits and services
  - Reporting of the status of readiness or delivery of headstones and markers ordered by the customer
  - Enrollment of customer in the VA healthcare system
  - Change in third party health insurance provider
  - Processing of customer request for a routine, primary care medical appointment
  - Processing of customer request for a rescheduled medical appointment of any kind

- Processing of customer request for cancellation of a medical appointment of any kind
- Processing of customer request to be mailed a copy of his/her medical records
- Reporting the status of laboratory tests (i.e., completed, not completed)
- Assistance with ordering prescription refills
- Reporting of phone number and e-mail address of customer's primary medical care provider
- Reporting of phone number and e-mail address of VA functional specialists currently engaged with the customer (e.g., primary care physician, claim adjudicator, insurance counselor, vocational rehabilitation counselor, etc.)
- Recording of customer's compliments or complaints
- Recording and reporting of receipt of hardcopy documents from the customer
- Reporting of any kind of general information about VA benefits, services, or places of business

- General VA information accessible through the CSE GUI and reportable to anyone calling VA for the information includes at least the following:

  - Description of all benefits and services offered by VA to veterans and dependents
  - Eligibility rules for each type of benefit or service
  - Instructions for applying for benefits and services
  - Health wellness and illness prevention information
  - Location of all VA medical centers, outpatient clinics, and nursing homes
  - Mailing addresses of all VA veteran service offices
  - Locations of all walk-in veteran service offices
  - Names and locations of all educational institutions recognized by VA where veterans can use GI Bill benefits.
  - Instructions on how education beneficiaries can electronically report their current enrollment status in school
  - Location of all cemeteries
  - Location of the cemetery, and the plot in the cemetery where a veteran is buried
  - The toll free numbers to reach specialized VA service organizations
  - Locations, telephone numbers, and office addresses of all VSOs and State VSOs
  - Telephone numbers and mailing addresses of appropriate offices of other federal departments that provide benefits to veterans (e.g., Social Security Administration, Medicare, etc.)
  - A description of and instructions for using the automated customer self-service system, which customers or potential customers, and VSOs, can use to transact business with VA.

- The CSE GUI can display a combined administrative summary of the history of all customer-specific transactions related to the actual receipt and use of benefits and services by a particular customer. This display is a well organized, summary list of all types of discrete business transactions that have occurred between the customer and VA with respect to any benefit or service, notwithstanding the need for privacy in some cases, particularly as it pertains to medical history. Each line of business determines which types of transactions are appropriate to report to the veteran or VSO through the CSE GUI.

- The CSE GUI provides screens for accessing VA bulletins and other news related to changes in laws, regulations, and policies governing the application for and delivery of benefits and services to VA customers, as well as VA policies, procedures, and tutorials for VSR-provided customer service.

- The CSE GUI provides online, context-sensitive help for all of its transaction types and for its generic features and functions.

- The CSE GUI supports the sending of recorded customer suggestions and complaints to a VA system used to assign and track follow-up actions.

- The CSE GUI provides screens used by VSRs to record the type and duration of telephone-based transactions conducted with customers, and provides this data to a VA system that uses it for statistical analysis of customer service center workload.

- The CSE GUI supports the recording of notes by its users about each interaction with a customer. These notes are automatically date/time stamped and can be viewed by anyone authorized to support that particular customer through the CSE, i.e., VSRs and any functional specialists. This log enables different VA professionals to maintain continuity and non-redundancy of services they provide to the same customer at different points in time.

- The CSE GUI is designed to a) run in a windows environment, b) incorporate best current human/computer interface practices, c) exhibit consistent generic features and functions irrespective of the transaction type, and d) support screen navigation that allows both rapid movement between unrelated areas as well as a flow that reflects a natural progression of work within a particular functional area of customer service.

- The CSE supports automatic receipt of telephone-based customer input through computer/telephone integration (CTI) servers and display of this data at the CSE GUI.

- Use of the CSE is location independent. The information technology of the CSE enables a VSR or other VA employee to gain access to it from any location where he or she can gain access to the VA wide area network (WAN) from inside the VA firewall.

3.   **Gateway-resident CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine.** As part of the VA CSE, a gateway-resident transaction broker and interface engine mediates real-time queries and real-time or delayed updates (initiated from the common CSE GUI) of the relevant VA production databases or replications of them. Exhibit 3-2 provides a depiction of the CSE conceptual IT architecture showing the central role of the transaction broker. The VA production systems appearing in Exhibit 3-2 are not an exclusive list of those that would eventually require interfaces to the CSE; however, they are the ones considered most likely to require such interfaces, notwithstanding any future efforts to combine or otherwise restructure some of them.

- The primary jobs of the CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine are to:

  - translate formatted transactions as they pass from the CSE GUI to the pertinent VA production system so that they are recognized and accepted by the production system as among its normal transaction types;

- translate the output from VA production systems so it can be appropriately displayed at the CSE GUI;

- convert communication protocols between the platform hosting the CSE GUI and the pertinent production system platform; and

- trigger the initiation of a production system transaction initiated by the CSE GUI and return the results to the GUI host in real time.

▪ The CSE GUI is a standard framework in which the "screens and widgets" of business-line specific transaction types conforming to the CSE GUI's technical standards can be integrated and linked through the CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine to the appropriate VA production system.

▪ The CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine is a service that is simultaneously hosted on multiple servers at any location in the VA communications network, permitting transaction load distribution that is adequate to ensure fast response time and reliable, continuous 24x7 operations on a national basis.

▪ VA will maintain the CSE transaction broker and interface engine, adapting it to changes in and consolidation of production systems as they occur, and to the addition of new production systems as required.

▪ The transaction broker enables the CSE user to exercise all transactions available at the CSE GUI with a single login userid and password, regardless of the number of production systems accessed during any given session.

▪ The interface engine detects when a particular production system interface or the production system itself is down, and notifies the user through the CSE GUI with an appropriate message. The CSE continues to access all production systems and interfaces that are in a normal operational state even when some are temporarily down.
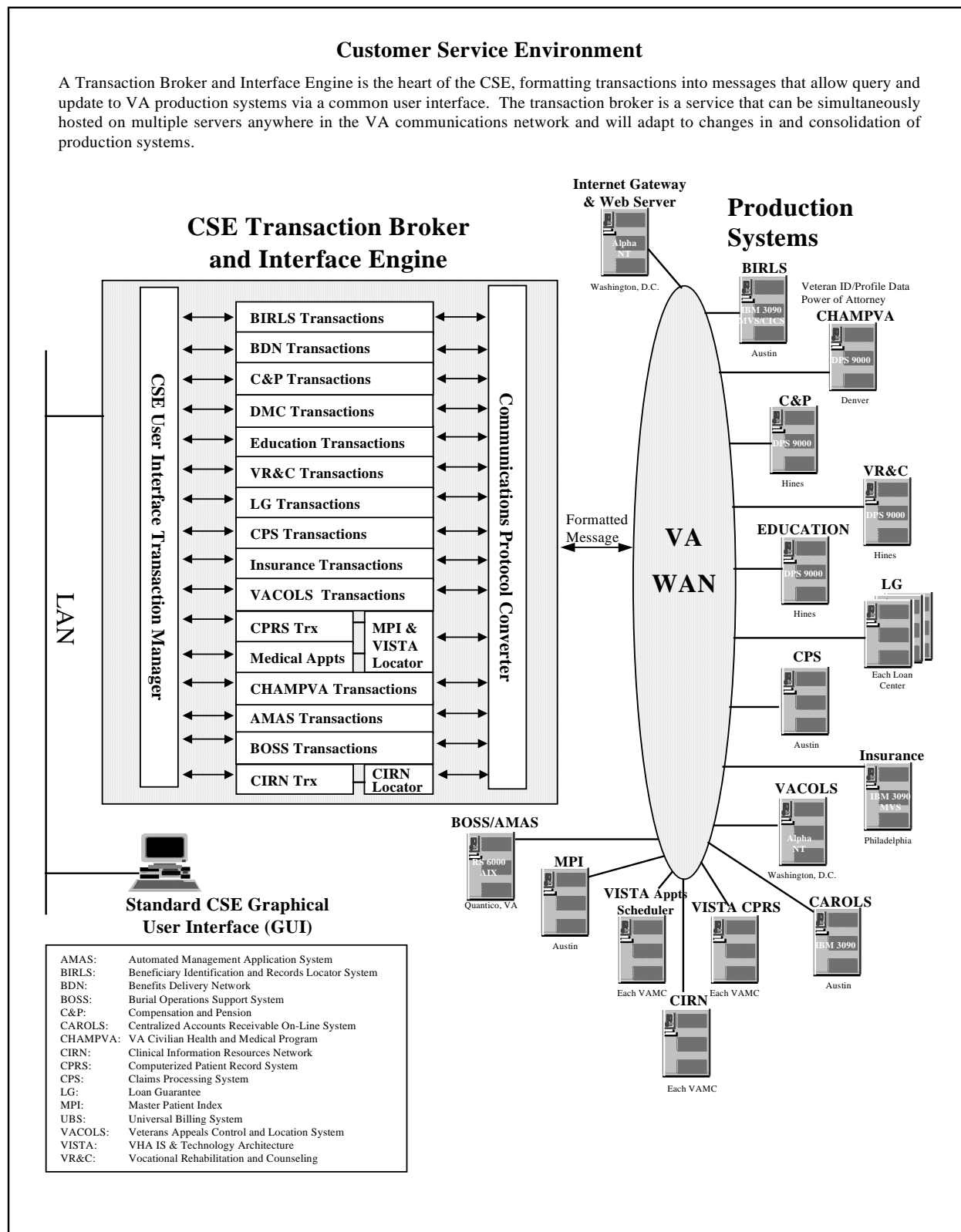
Customer Service Environment

A Transaction Broker and Interface Engine is the heart of the CSE, formatting transactions into messages that allow query and update to VA production systems via a common user interface. The transaction broker is a service that can be simultaneously hosted on multiple servers anywhere in the VA communications network and will adapt to changes in and consolidation of production systems.

Exhibit 3-2. Customer Service Environment

Diagram labels:

CSE Transaction Broker and Interface Engine

LAN — CSE User Interface Transaction Manager

- BIRLS Transactions
- BDN Transactions
- C&P Transactions
- DMC Transactions
- Education Transactions
- VR&C Transactions
- LG Transactions
- CPS Transactions
- Insurance Transactions
- VACOLS Transactions
- CPRS Trx — MPI & VISTA Locator
- Medical Appts
- CHAMPVA Transactions
- AMAS Transactions
- BOSS Transactions
- CIRN Trx — CIRN Locator

Communications Protocol Converter

Standard CSE Graphical User Interface (GUI)

Production Systems

Internet Gateway & Web Server — Alpha NT — Washington, D.C.

Formatted Message — VA WAN

BIRLS — IBM 3090 MVS/CICS — Austin — Veteran ID/Profile Data Power of Attorney

CHAMPVA — DPS 9000 — Denver

C&P — DPS 9000 — Hines

VR&C — DPS 9000 — Hines

EDUCATION — DPS 9000 — Hines

LG — Each Loan Center

CPS — Austin

Insurance — IBM 3090 MVS — Philadelphia

VACOLS — Alpha NT — Washington, D.C.

CAROLS — IBM 3090 — Austin

BOSS/AMAS — RS 6000 AIX — Quantico, VA

MPI — Austin

VISTA Appts Scheduler — Each VAMC

VISTA CPRS — Each VAMC

CIRN — Each VAMC

Legend:

AMAS:	Automated Management Application System
BIRLS:	Beneficiary Identification and Records Locator System
BDN:	Benefits Delivery Network
BOSS:	Burial Operations Support System
C&P:	Compensation and Pension
CAROLS:	Centralized Accounts Receivable On-Line System
CHAMPVA:	VA Civilian Health and Medical Program
CIRN:	Clinical Information Resources Network
CPRS:	Computerized Patient Record System
CPS:	Claims Processing System
LG:	Loan Guarantee
MPI:	Master Patient Index
UBS:	Universal Billing System
VACOLS:	Veterans Appeals Control and Location System
VISTA:	VHA IS & Technology Architecture
VR&C:	Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling

4. **Expert System for Determination of Potential Benefits Eligibility.** VSRs and claims adjudicators use an automated eligibility determination expert system to help them determine a customer's *potential* eligibility for any or all VA benefits and services. The system automatically matches the customer's profile with the statutory eligibility rules of each benefit program or service. A conceptual view of the expert system is depicted in Exhibit 3-3. It can be accessed through the CSE GUI.

- The eligibility determination system is rule-based, supporting ease of change to eligibility rules or customer profile data with immediate re-assessment of potential eligibility. The system can determine eligibility as of specified dates in the past, basing its determination on the statutory eligibility rules in force on those dates.

- The customer's profile can be data provided by the customer interactively with his/her request for a potential eligibility determination as a "what-if" scenario, or the expert system can use customer profile data that is already resident in automated VA files.
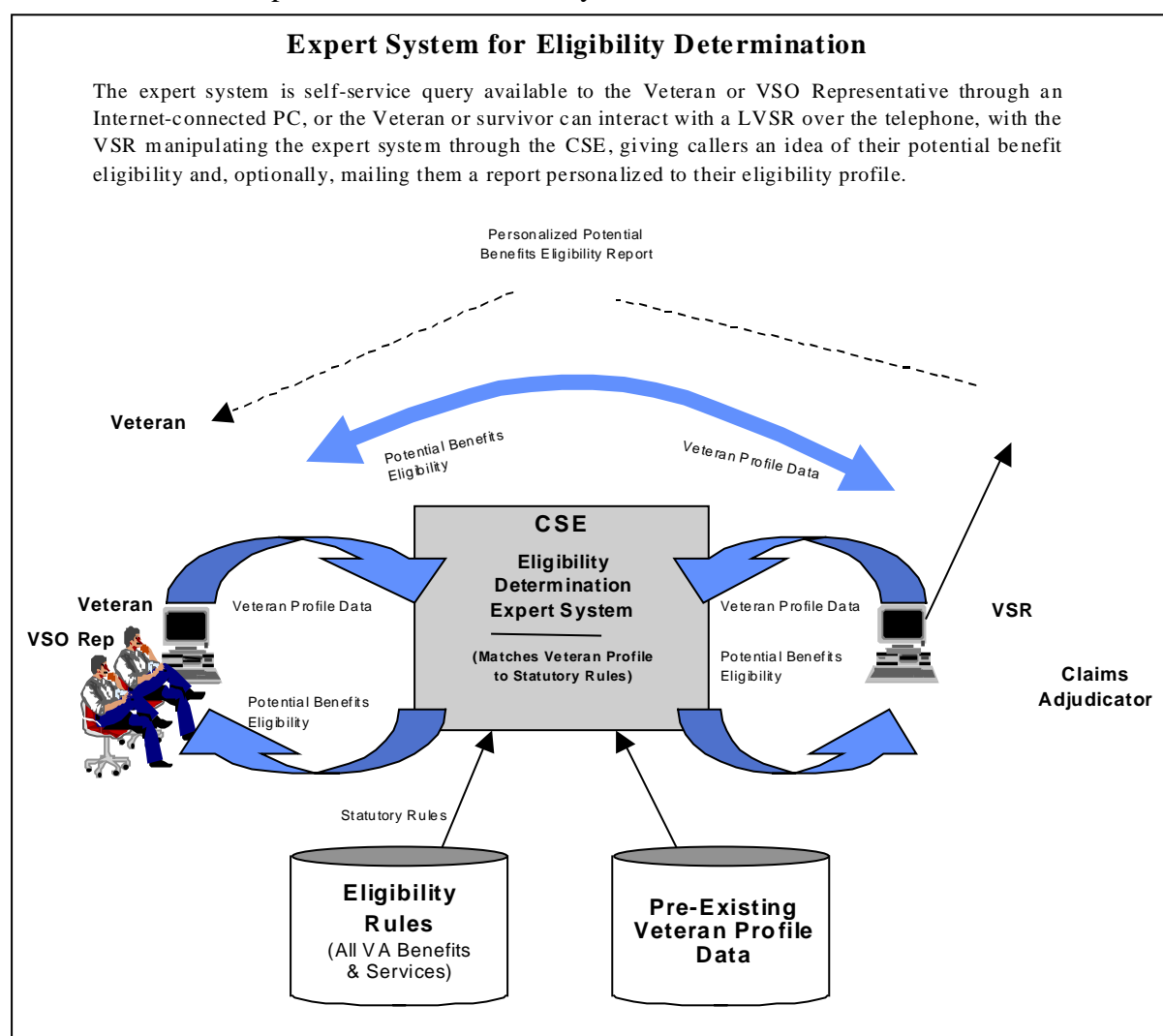
Expert System for Eligibility Determination

The expert system is self-service query available to the Veteran or VSO Representative through an Internet-connected PC, or the Veteran or survivor can interact with a LVSR over the telephone, with the VSR manipulating the expert system through the CSE, giving callers an idea of their potential benefit eligibility and, optionally, mailing them a report personalized to their eligibility profile.

Personalized Potential
Benefits Eligibility Report

Veteran

Potential Benefits
Eligibility

Veteran Profile Data

CSE

**Eligibility
Determination
Expert System**

**(Matches Veteran Profile
to Statutory Rules)**

Veteran
VSO Rep

Veteran Profile Data

Potential Benefits
Eligibility

Veteran Profile Data

Potential Benefits
Eligibility

VSR

**Claims
Adjudicator**

Statutory Rules

**Eligibility
Rules**
(All VA Benefits
& Services)

**Pre-Existing
Veteran Profile
Data**

Exhibit 3-3. Expert System for Eligibility Determination.

- If the veteran's profile data maintained by VA is considered to be factual, then a veteran's eligibility for benefits and services is automatically confirmed by the eligibility determination system, and the appropriate VA functional specialist uses it as an authoritative basis for initiating actions formally to award benefits to the claimant.

- Given access to the customer's mailing address, the expert system automatically generates a hardcopy customized list of the customer's potential VA benefits eligibility and mails it to them at their request. The system keeps a record of such correspondence. The same kind of correspondence is possible using electronic mail if the customer prefers.

5.   **Internet E-mail between Customers and VA.** VA provides its customers the opportunity to communicate with VSRs and functional specialists, including primary care health care providers, through Internet-based e-mail.

- Functional specialists control the distribution of their own e-mail addresses.

- VA business lines, specific facilities, or particular organizational units may use organization-level electronic mailboxes in lieu of or in addition to person-specific e-mail addresses for email exchange with customers.

- For responding to customers' e-mail, VA professionals can pick from an electronic list of standard responses tailored to their business line and functional area, as appropriate.

CUSTOMER SELF-SERVICE

Self-service involves automated capabilities VA puts at the disposal of customers or VSOs, enabling them to transact business with VA without intervention by VA employees.

6.   **Telephone-based Self-service.** Customers and VSOs can call a single toll-free number to gain access to a range of telephone-based self-service transactions enabled by VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- The automated response system (ARS) prompts customers for data that they can enter using the touch-tone telephone keypad and/or through voice input.

- When a customer uses voice input to respond to an ARS prompt, it is either recorded as a voice mail message and later processed manually by a VSR team member, or it is digitized by the ARS and automatically formatted as a transaction by the CSE Transaction Broker for processing by the appropriate VA production system.

- Within the limitations of ARS technology and customer access controls, the customer can access the CSE through the ARS and conduct business with VA without the intervention of a VSR. The customer can execute inquiry or update transactions supported by the CSE that are amenable to touch-tone and voice inputs by the customer and voice outputs by the ARS.

- In using the ARS interface to the CSE, the customer can switch to speaking directly to a VSR at any time during the ARS session.

- The ARS interface to the CSE gives a voice acknowledgement to the customer whenever a transaction is successfully completed and an explanatory/instructional message whenever it is prevented from completing a transaction.

- Whenever a customer uses the CSE entirely through the ARS to transact business that requires authentication of the customer's identity, the CSE maintains an audit trail by recording the customer ID, the date and time of the interaction, and the transactions executed.

7.   Internet-based Self-service. Customers or VSOs can use a personal computer from home, from a public building, or from a VSO office and gain access to VA self-service transactions through the Internet that are supported by the CSE, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- The customer gains access to self-service transactions of the CSE through the Internet and the home page of VA's Web site, www.va.gov.

- Customer access to veteran-specific data that is maintained by a VA production system is controlled by a combination of the CSE's self-service user authentication methods, the internal access control mechanisms of the legacy system, and firewalls in VA's communications infrastructure.

- CSE-enabled transaction types not available for use directly by customers are hidden from the users on the transaction menus displayed by the CSE's standard user interface.

- CSE-enabled transactions that are available for direct access by the customer through an Internet-connected PC include at least the following:

    - Submission of application for all benefits and services[3]
    - Request for and display of current status of any claim
    - Request for and display of current status of any appeal
    - Change of name
    - Change of address
    - Change of marital status
    - Change of dependent status
    - Change of income
    - Change of direct deposit bank account number
    - Change in status of power of attorney representation
    - Change in beneficiary status of life insurance policy
    - Request for and display of status or record of insurance-based loan payments
    - Request for and display of balance of insurance-based loan
    - Change in status as Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) student
    - Request for and display of remaining MGIB benefit
    - Submission of confirmation of continued enrollment in education program financed by GI Bill
    - Request for and display of current or pending benefit payments (date, amount)

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[3] This transaction type requires no authentication of the self-service user's identity

- Request for and display of a summary of all VA benefit payments made to the customer (date, amount, reason)
- Request for and display of the status of readiness or delivery of headstones or markers ordered by the customer[4]
- Enrollment in the VA healthcare system[4]
- Change in third party health insurance provider
- Request for a routine, primary care medical appointment[4]
- Request for a rescheduled medical appointment of any kind
- Cancellation of a medical appointment of any kind
- Request for receipt by normal U.S. mail of the customer's medical records
- Request for and display of status of laboratory tests (i.e., completed, not completed)
- Request for and display of phone number and e-mail address of VA functional specialists currently engaged with the customer (e.g., primary care physician, claim adjudicator, insurance counselor, vocational rehabilitation counselor, etc.)[4]
- Submission of compliments or complaints[4]
- Request for and display of any kind of general information about VA benefits, services, or places of business[4]

- The customer can opt to call a VSR at any time while using VA's self-service system, and a VSR will help the customer use the system to complete a transaction.

- Non-VA organizations agree to host a terminal and to provide assistance to the veteran when needed. The self-service terminals can be any personal computer (PC) having the minimum configuration needed to access the Internet already in use by the organization for its own business purposes. VA self-service capable terminals are located in public buildings where personnel are available to help the veteran use the system. These public buildings include the following:

  - VA walk-in facilities (e.g., VA medical centers)
  - VSO offices
  - State VSO offices
  - Federal office buildings
  - Public libraries

8. Dynamic Fact-based Approach and Digital Certificates for Authentication of Self-service Users. Identification and authentication (I&A) of customers requesting access to veteran-confidential self-service transactions is accomplished for both telephone and Internet access through a dynamic fact-based approach, and supplemented with digital certificate technology for Internet access. Exhibit 3-4 presents a conceptual I&A architecture.

- The dynamic fact-based approach accepts the veteran's SSN and name and, querying VA's copy-of-record system for customer identification data, prompts the user for two or three personal items of data (i.e., facts), some of which relate to his/her uniformed service history which no one else is likely to know. As a dynamic authentication module, the facts prompted for will change with each new self-service session the customer initiates.

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[4] This transaction type requires no authentication of the self-service user's identity.
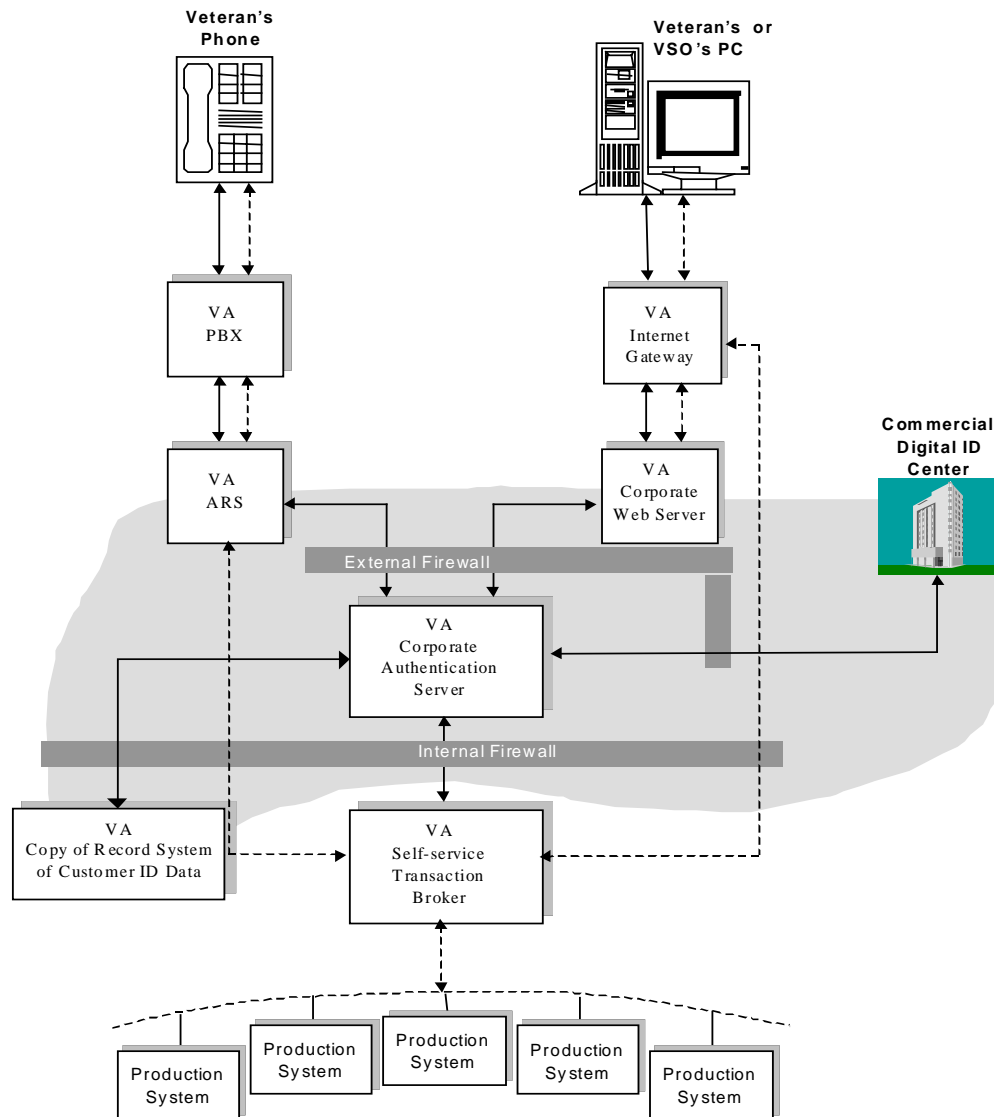

- To initiate use of certain veteran-confidential self-service transactions, customers must formally opt in to the VA self-service environment. Once they've opted in, customers can opt out of self-service at any time, precluding anyone from accessing their data that way.

- Customers are permitted to view and update only their own veteran-specific data. VSOs may view and update the data of any veteran for whom they have power of attorney.

- For Internet-based access, veterans are given an additional option to use a digital ID/certificate to authenticate themselves. VA supplies the digital certificates through a commercial third party vendor until the Federal Government implements a "public key infrastructure" which issues a certificate to citizens that would be valid for all government agencies. VSO representatives are required to use digital certificates when representing a customer.

Identification & Authentication of Self-service Customers

Shown are the I&A conceptual architecture components and the notional data flows among them in the overall conceptual view of the VA self-service infrastructure. Once a veteran is authenticated by the dynamic fact-based module executing on the authentication server (or by a commercially issued digital certificate), the authentication server establishes a secure session between the veteran's PC and the VA Self-service Transaction Broker, displaying the appropriate self-service transaction menu web page on the veteran's PC. Then, the authentication server is out of the loop until the session is broken and a new one established. A similar situation occurs when the veteran uses telephone-based self-service options.

Veteran's Phone

Veteran's or VSO's PC

Commercial Digital ID Center

VA PBX

VA Internet Gateway

VA ARS

VA Corporate Web Server

External Firewall

VA Corporate Authentication Server

Internal Firewall

VA Copy of Record System of Customer ID Data

VA Self-service Transaction Broker

Production System

Production System

Production System

Production System

Production System

Note: Components in Shaded area are directly involved in authentication.
Solid lines show part of authentication process data flow.
Dashed lines show part of secured self-service transaction data flow.

Exhibit 3-4. Identification and Authentication of Self-service Customers

INTERNAL DATA SHARING AND EXCHANGE

The capabilities identified above are enabled for the most part by significant sharing and exchange of customer-specific data within and among VA business lines. This next set of capabilities specifically addresses the means by which such sharing and exchange happens.

9.   Authoritative Copy of Record for Customer ID Data. A single VA production system maintains the authoritative copy of record of all veteran identification and basic eligibility determination data that is needed by multiple lines of business. A software module in the CSE automatically ensures that the authoritative copy of record and all full or partial copies of it that are maintained by other VA systems are kept in sync. Exhibit 3-5 portrays the projected interplay among the copy of record (COR) system, other production systems that maintain redundant copies of COR data, and the systems' users.

- Updates to the COR database can be initiated using the COR system itself, using the CSE GUI, or using the user interface of another VA production system that maintains redundant versions of COR data in its own database.

- Updates applied to production system databases that were mediated by the CSE 'synchronization module' can be applied in real-time or batch mode, whichever mode best suits a particular production system.

- The COR database flags certain sensitive customer records indicating query and update restrictions placed on them and special alerts associated with them.

- System-wide audits are periodically performed to ensure veteran identification and eligibility data is in sync in all production databases that store it.

One Authoritative Copy of Record for Customer ID and Eligibility Determination Data

One VA system, legacy or modernized, controls the authoritative copy of record (COR) of customers' identification and basic eligibility data in a national database. In the diagram below, three transaction paths are depicted. In Path 1, a VA employee uses the Customer Service Environment (CSE) GUI to query and update the national database interactively through the CSE servers. In Path 2, a VA employee updates and queries the national database interactively through a CSE server while originating the transaction from the user interface of VA application X. In Path 3, VA production application databases are kept in sync with the national database in scheduled batch mode, with these batch processes mediated by CSE servers.
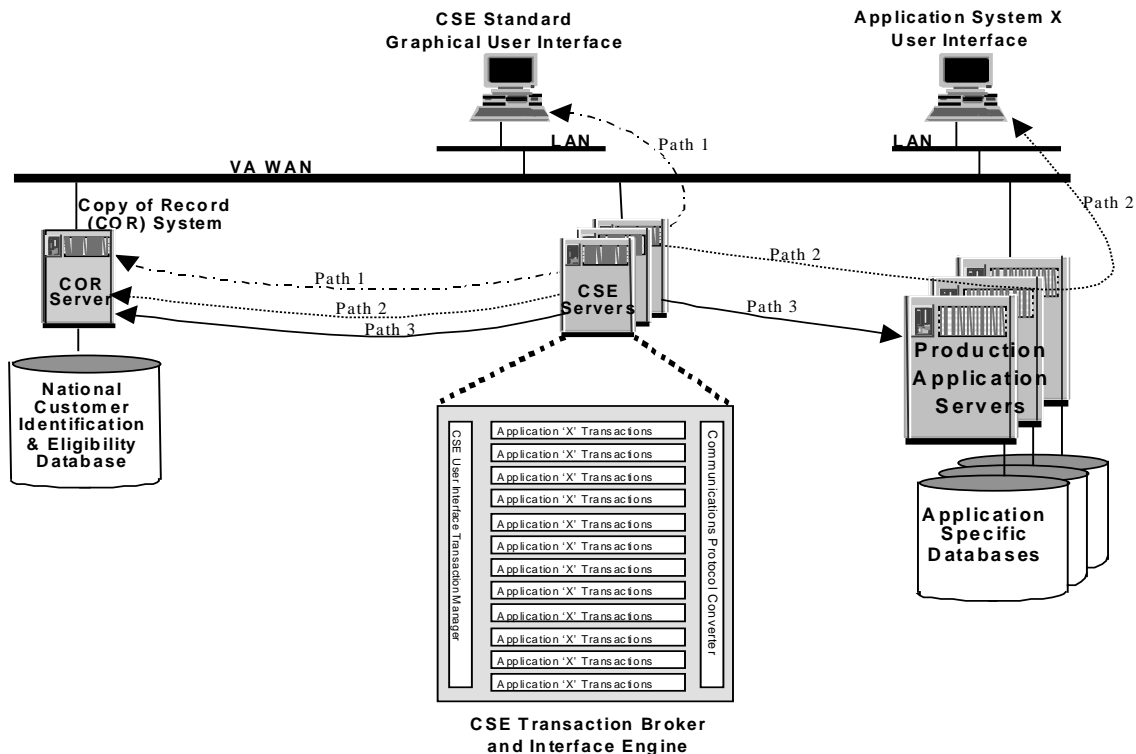
Exhibit 3-5. Authoritative Copy of Record.

10.   Fully Compatible, Interoperable E-mail within VA. The staff in all VA offices, regardless of their location, can readily send and receive secure electronic mail to/from each other, including attachments of compound documents containing any type of data.

▪ VA-originated e-mail conforms with FIPS governing e-mail and secure e-mail.

▪ This level of e-mail capability is also possible between VA and all VSOs.

11.   Electronic Imaging, Indexed Storage and VA-wide Retrieval On Demand of Claims Folders and Medical Records. For all active healthcare patients and benefits claimants, VA routinely creates scanned images of any hardcopy medical records and all documents that support their claims and health care, indexing and storing them for fast electronic dissemination and retrieval by authorized VA professionals, VSOs, or customers, on demand.

- The electronically imaged and indexed records are stored and electronically exchanged in conformance with the FIPS or defacto industry standard for each data type.

- The imaged records are used to support local clinical health care, telemedicine, claims development and adjudication, and appeals.

- Once high quality electronic images of hardcopy records are resident in VA's automated repositories, the hard copies can be discarded.

12.   Widespread Use of Video-Conferencing.   Every VA facility is equipped with interoperable and compatible conference style and/or desktop video-conferencing technology, making substantial use of this technology for geographically remote clinical consultations and patient examinations (telemedicine), and to conduct meetings and hearings related to claims adjudication and appeal.

13.   Workflow Automation for Process Integration and Standardization.   VA uses network-based, interoperable, and compatible workflow automation software to manage the interdependent activities of standard, high volume, customer service processes (e.g., claims and appeals processing). Exhibit 3-6 depicts a conceptual IT view of workflow automation from a national VA perspective.

- The workflow system tracks the status of each event or activity that is associated with a particular customer service process.

- Individual workflows begin with receipt of the customer's request and end with the initial delivery of the benefit or service, or when the process prematurely terminates for any reason.
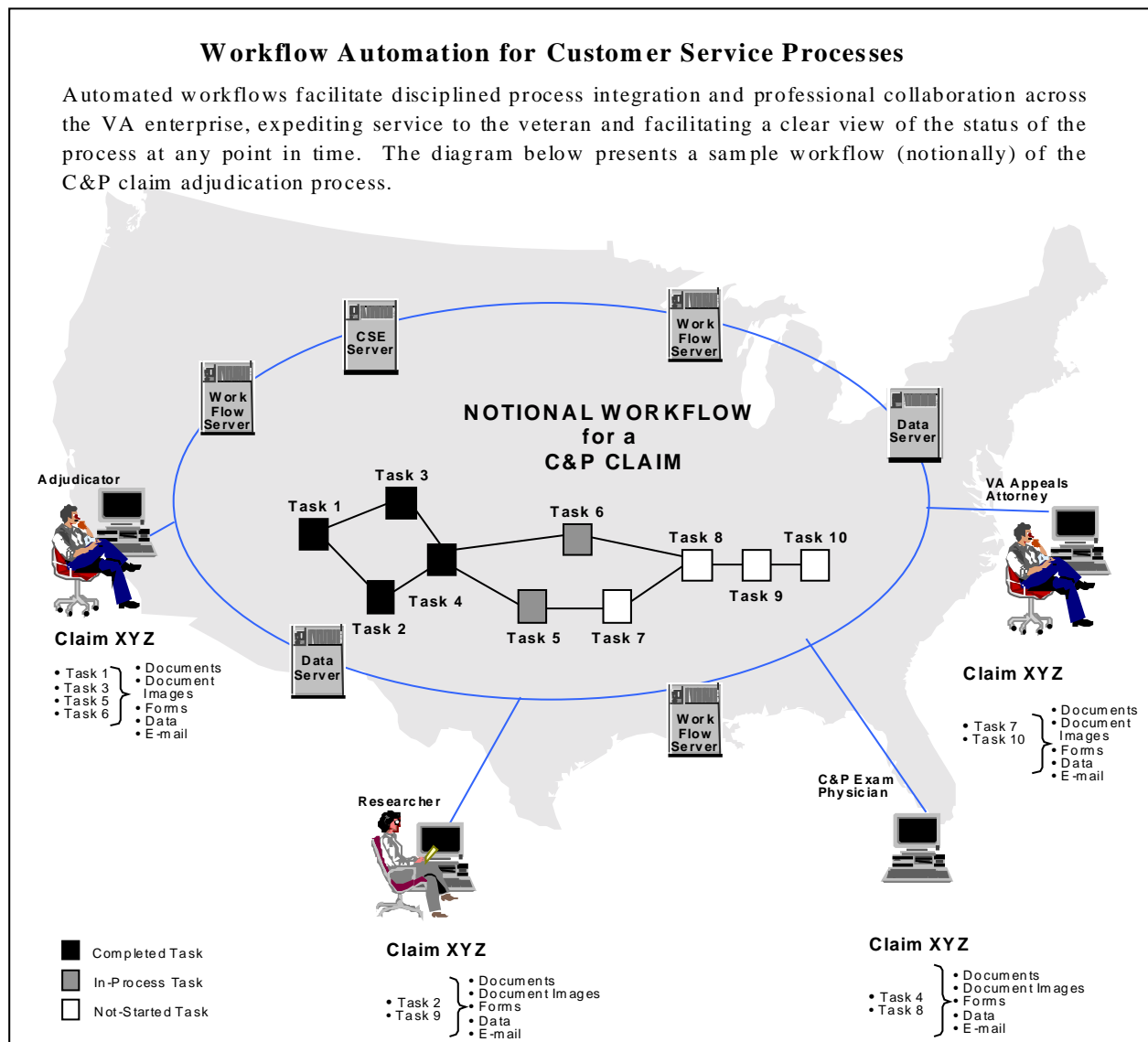
Workflow Automation for Customer Service Processes

Automated workflows facilitate disciplined process integration and professional collaboration across the VA enterprise, expediting service to the veteran and facilitating a clear view of the status of the process at any point in time. The diagram below presents a sample workflow (notionally) of the C&P claim adjudication process.

Exhibit 3-6. Workflow Automation for Standard Customer Service Processes.

- Workflows integrate activities within and across business lines wherever dependencies between them exist irrespective of the geographic location of execution of any activity.

- The workflow system supports easy insertion of non-standard events or activities in the standard network of activities and events for a particular customer-specific instance of a workflow to allow for exceptions and some "local" customization.

- The workflow system, implemented using a common off-the-shelf product, gives the status of each activity or event and estimates the completion date of the entire process. The status shows which events are not yet started, in-process, and completed. It also shows which events are taking longer than expected to complete, and it gives an estimate of completion of

the whole process based on historical averages and manually modified as appropriate by known circumstances in that particular customer's workflow instance.

- The workflows are designed to automatically list and give online access to shared files and document images that are pertinent to a particular activity of the process.

- The workflow system supports:

  - assignments of individuals and/or groups to a particular activity of the workflow;

  - automated entry of user notes tracked to the user and to particular activities of the workflow;

  - integration with VA's standard e-mail system and office automation tools;

  - quick, online access to the telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of VA and personnel of VA partners who are assigned to execution of workflow activities.

14.   Complete Data Communications Connectivity and Interoperability. The VA data communications infrastructure of its WAN and all LANs enables complete VA-wide connectivity and interoperability, providing seamless transport of all types of data between all its processing platforms.

- VA implements the major Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) and/or de facto industry standards for system interoperability and software portability.

- Whenever VA uses a particular communications protocol for special applications only, it also implements, when technically feasible, the necessary hardware and software to convert data managed by that protocol to the VA standard protocol, enabling transport of the data to other parts and processing platforms of VA that require use of it.

- VA's Internet gateway(s) provide access for veterans and VSOs to the self-service options of the CSE and to VA's WWW sites.

- VA's extranet gateway(s) provide access to platforms of other government agencies, commercial entities, and educational institutions.

- The total network connectivity of all VA user workstations and servers enables the potential for all VA professionals in all lines of business to access and analyze any kind of data stored in any VA database about the veteran for the purpose of enhancing the overall quality of care and service provided to the veteran throughout his/her tenure as a VA customer.

Important customer data is often resident in the hardcopy and automated files of other federal departments and agencies, data which is essential for VA to share through electronic access and exchange.

15.   Robust Electronic Exchange of Veteran Personnel and Medical Data with DoD.
VA electronically acquires from DoD, both on demand and through rule-based dissemination a) the fully automated medical records of all veterans who become patients in the VA healthcare system, records that conform to a standard format used by DoD and VA, and b) all personnel data about veterans and their dependents that is pertinent to qualifying and servicing them as VA customers.

- VA's and DoD's automated medical records comply with common technical standards for all types of medical record data, and these standards conform to de facto or emerging healthcare industry standards.

- DoD discharge medical examinations are conducted using VA protocols/procedures, and the fully automated records of them are electronically transferred to VA on demand, including electronic images of documents and medical film.

- Electronic images of the historic, still hardcopy DoD medical records of *new* claimants for VA benefits and services are routinely made and stored in VA repositories at the time the claim is initiated. DoD responds rapidly to VA's electronic request for the hardcopy medical records.

- All uniformed services use a copy of the same DoD system and database schema to manage the discharge process of their respective organizations. The database contains all the data captured by the veteran's active duty service that is relevant to qualifying the veteran for VA benefits and services, and to delivery of them to the customer. It includes at least all DD214 data and a summary of the veteran's medical history.

- On a regularly scheduled basis, appropriate veteran personnel data is electronically transferred from the DoD system (used by each uniformed service) to VA, enabling VA to automatically capture data about all its current and potential customers in a standard manner. VA uses the personnel data provided through the DoD system to update its own authoritative copy of record database that houses customer identification and eligibility data.

- Once transferred to VA, veteran personnel and medical data (for discharged personnel only) is archived from the databases managed by DoD and other uniformed services. Thenceforward, the federal government considers VA to be the single manager of the data for that veteran.

- If the veteran returns to active duty, VA electronically transfers a copy of the veteran's personnel and medical data back to the appropriate uniformed service, doing so as an automatic system-to-system transaction.

**16.	Routine Electronic Data Exchange with Other Government Agencies.** VA professionals conduct interactive sessions with other government agency servers to assist individual customers in real time, and VA servers routinely communicate with servers of other government agencies, interchanging large data files to make automated adjustments to veteran data maintained by VA's benefit delivery systems. The conceptual IT architecture supporting inter-agency information exchange is depicted in Exhibit 3-7. The department and agencies listed in the diagram are only a subset of all with which VA exchanges data needed to fully serve veterans.

- When adjustments are required and can be made on the basis of the data gathered from other agencies alone, then the appropriate VA production system databases are updated and the necessary adjustments are made automatically.

- From the automated user interfaces of VA systems, including the CSE GUI, VA professionals can execute selected online queries against systems of other government agencies.
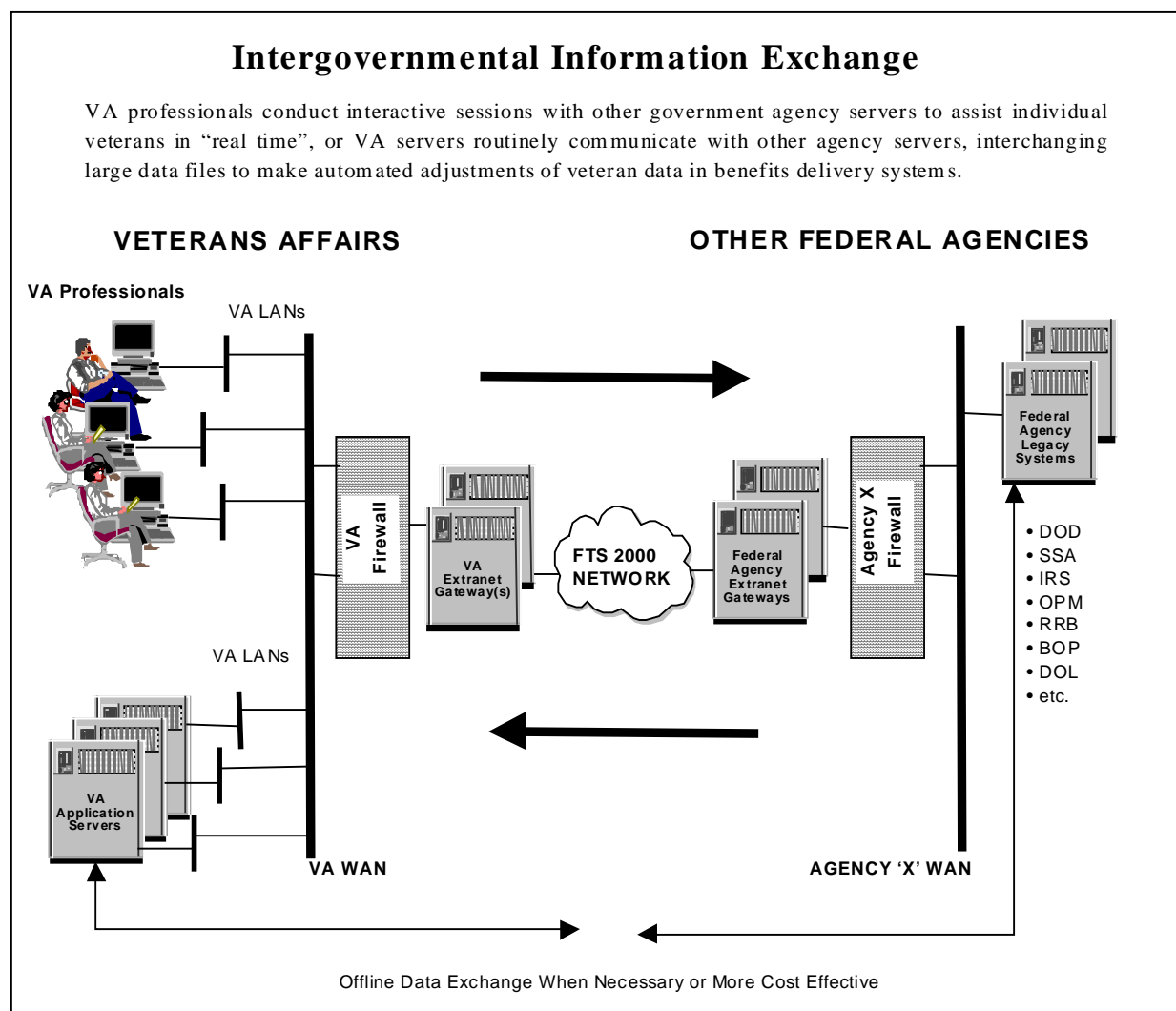

Exhibit 3-7. Intergovernmental Information Exchange.

17. **Automated Customer Income Verification**. Manual income verification processes are replaced with inter-agency sharing of veterans' income data, and benefit adjustments are automatically and retroactively applied.

- VA has agreements with all government agencies (IRS and SSA being the primary ones) that keep personal income data on veterans to electronically provide that data to VA on both a regularly scheduled basis and on demand.

- VA trusts and uses veterans' income data provided by SSA and IRS in lieu of conducting its own income verification interviews and investigations of veterans. It is the only veteran income data VA uses to determine the appropriate levels of VA services and benefits due the veteran where income level is a factor in the determination.

- As a customer's reported income level changes, VA adjusts the level of benefit or service it provides to him or her and does so retroactively to compensate or adjust for under- or over-payments that are determined to have occurred. Whenever the appropriate VA system determines that downward adjustments in the customer's benefit payments are warranted, the system automatically notifies the customer a fair period of time in advance of making the adjustment. Adjustments that increase the benefit payment need no advance notification.

- Veterans receiving income-dependent benefits or services are regularly reminded that they have an obligation to report changes in their income whenever the changes occur. VA adjusts benefits paid to veterans based on these voluntarily reported changes.

EXTERNAL DATA SHARING AND EXCHANGE - NON-FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The speed and accuracy of customer service will be significantly enhanced with fully electronic data exchange in key areas that deal with paying veteran benefits and interacting with commercial and educational institutions which provide benefits to veterans on VA's behalf.

18. **Direct Deposit of All Customer Benefit Payments.** VA uses electronic funds transfer technology to directly deposit monetary entitlements into the bank accounts of every qualifying veteran and veteran's dependents.

19. **Paperless Data Exchange with Commercial Partners.** In its business dealings with all commercial partners who provide benefits and services to VA customers on VA's behalf, VA exchanges all data electronically. This includes the following interfaces:

- VA's Loan Guarantee service with commercial lending institutions
- VA's Education Service with educational institutions
- VA's Insurance Service with commercial insurance companies
- VHA with private health care providers for medical data
- The National Cemetery Service with private cemeteries and vendors and transporters of headstones and markers.

CUSTOMER OUTREACH AND FEEDBACK

Advanced information technology can enhance VA's ability to be more proactive with customer outreach and more rigorous in dealing with feedback from the customer.

20. WWW for Customer Outreach. VA uses the World Wide Web (WWW) as one method of information dissemination to the general veteran population.

- By accessing VA's WWW home page, veterans, VSOs, and the general public gain access to all general information about VA that is also accessible to VSRs through the VA Customer Service Environment (CSE).

- The WWW instructs veterans, VSOs, and the general public about how to contact VSRs and how to use the self-service capabilities of the CSE.

- The WWW posts regulatory and statutory changes in VA's benefits and services.

- VA's WWW sites implement common policies and are regularly reviewed for compliance.

21. Built-in Customer Feedback Mechanisms. VA's automated Customer Service Environment (CSE) has built-in customer feedback mechanisms that veterans and VSO representatives use to express their likes and dislikes about the actual delivery of benefits and services as well as the assistance they received from VA to obtain them.

- This CSE feedback mechanism supplements, but does not replace, formal VA customer satisfaction surveys.

- The data collected through the built-in feedback mechanism is fed to a customer complaint tracking and follow-up system.

- Periodic audits of the CSE usage profile also provide trend data for analysis of customer service quality.

- The data collected through the built-in feedback mechanism and CSE system audits is periodically analyzed through automated means on a national and local level and provided to the appropriate customer service and specialized functional areas of VA to use for continuous process improvement and comparison with established service outcomes and performance measures.

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ARS	Automated Response System
B/S	Benefits/Services
BOP	Bureau of Prisons
C&P	Compensation and Pension
COR	Copy of Record
CSE	Customer Service Environment
CTI	Computer/Telephone Integration
DIC	Dependency and Indemnity Compensation
DoD	Department of Defense
FIPS	Federal Information Processing Standards
GUI	Graphical User Interface
ICD	Insurance Claims Division
IDCU	Integrated Data Communications Utility
IT	Information Technology
MGIB	Montgomery GI Bill
NAPA	National Academy of Public Administration
NCS	National Cemetery System
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OIRM	Office of Information Resource Management
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PC	Personal Computer
SGLI	Servicemen's Group Life Insurance
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VA	Veterans Affairs
VACO	Veterans Affairs Central Office
VBA	Veterans Benefit Administration
VCAC	Veterans Claims Adjudication Commission
VEAP	Veterans Education Assistance Program

VGLI	Veterans Group Life Insurance
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
VISN	Veterans Integrated Services Network
VSO	Veterans Service Organization
VSR	Veterans Service Representative
WAN	Wide-Area Network

STUDY APPROACH

The study approach followed by the project team to produce an approved *One VA* Vision was guided by several objectives: maintaining objectivity; learning about the VA and its problems and opportunities; gaining buy-in from senior managers representing corporate VA and each of its business lines; obtaining the voice of the customer; and maintaining the proper relationship of functional requirements or capabilities to IT solutions. These objectives and how they were met are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Objectivity. VA Central Office wanted an independent, objective view of how to make effective use of information technology in a strategic manner to achieve the goal of establishing One VA for customer service that spanned all of VA's products and services. To this end, the project team, Birch & Davis, with substantial management consulting experience with VA, and CACI, an information technology integration firm with virtually no experience with VA provided this independent view. Veterans Affairs Central Office (VACO) gave this consulting team general guidance and assistance but allowed it to formulate the draft vision as it best saw fit, based on interviews and research it conducted.

Precedence of Functional Requirements. The need for functional process improvement drives investment in and design of information technology solutions. For this reason, the study approach first determined the functional capabilities of the One VA vision and subsequently defined a conceptual architecture as the basis of an IT vision to support delivery of those capabilities. However, it is becoming increasingly common in both public and private organizations to see advances in information technology at least inspire, if not drive the re-engineering of business processes of an enterprise and sometimes substantial changes to its infrastructure. The flavor of IT-inspired process improvement has influenced the vision presented here.

Management Involvement and Consensus Building. The technical approach recognized that achieving wide acceptance of the vision within VA and by VA's oversight agencies, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Congress, is at least as important, if not more so, as the vision itself. This was accomplished primarily by involving key personnel in interviews and workshops where they were part of the process and their inputs clearly had an influence on the formulation of the vision.

Interviews. To foster broad-based management buy-in to the vision, the project team conducted 28 formal interviews of key management stakeholders. The interviews represented a full cross section of all business lines from both the headquarters and field operations view. They formed the primary basis for establishing the overall functional requirement of the IT Vision. Appendix D provides a list of all individuals whom the project team formally interviewed. And, a separate annex to this Vision, informally called the *Vision Interview Book*, contains the documented interviews of all 29 interviewees, edited and approved by the interviewees. It is available from VA OIRM.

Management and Technical Workshops. Following the interviews, three workshops were held. Two primarily addressed the functional capabilities of the vision and was attended by some of the managers interviewed, and some who were not. The third workshop addressed the conceptual architecture aspect of the vision and was attended by senior IT professionals representing all lines of business, some of whom were interviewed. The workshops facilitated a free and open exchange on the pros and cons of each major component of the proposed vision. They were held to refine the draft vision and reach a reasonable consensus before submitting the vision for approval. Their workshop inputs were analyzed and appropriately incorporated before submitting the vision for formal approval. Workshop results were documented separately and provided to the workshop attendees.

Document Review and Analysis.   Project team members reviewed numerous existing documents, in draft and final form. These documents include department and administration strategic plans, IT strategic and tactical plans, business plans of individual Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) services, Veterans Integrated Services Network (VISN) business plans, business process re-engineering reports, and studies on VBA operations that were conducted in recent years, to include the 1996 report to Congress by the Veterans' Claims Adjudication Commission (VCAC) and the 1997 report by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA).

The document review served two purposes. It helped the project team to understand the extent and seriousness of the operational problems within each line of business, and the plans and initiatives VA is pursuing to improve performance in many areas. It also helped the project team assess the current VA plans and initiatives in light of the Vision, enabling it to make recommendations to adjust or redirect them for better alignment with the Vision.   These recommendations are provided in a separate report.

The Voice of the Customer. To ensure the vision is properly influenced by the needs of the customer -- the veterans and their families -- the project team reviewed the results of customer surveys and focus groups conducted by VA in the last few years. Insights gained from this review were blended with the ideas expressed in the interviews and used to determine the needed functional capabilities of the vision. The results of the analysis of all sources used is found at Appendix F, along with the sources themselves.

VSO Involvement.   Following the last workshop, a group representing 17 VSOs were briefed together on each of the major concepts of the Vision contained in the pre-workshop draft. They voiced strong support for the vision concepts. The VSOs were included in the distribution of the final draft.

Implementing the IT Vision and Architecture. Following approval of the Vision, a plan to implement the capabilities described by it will be prepared and coordinated with key managers across VA. Upon approval, funding is expected to be applied to execute the implementation plan, beginning with pilot projects that, if proved successful, will be fully deployed. Program integration support will ensure that the vision and supporting architecture will be appropriately

adapted, as necessary, to changes that may occur in the business and IT environment. This support will also help to ensure that implementation stays on track in the out years.

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ONE VA: TWO PERSPECTIVES

The VA managers who were interviewed in connection with establishing the Vision were all asked the question, What does "*One VA* for Customer Service" mean to you? Two views of *One VA* emerged, the customer view and the internal VA view. Their definitions were presented in the Executive Summary and this appendix elaborates on the basic definition of the two views.

CUSTOMER VIEW OF *ONE VA*

Customer view addresses how VA should represent itself to customers, at the customer "interface", to give the clear impression to veterans that it operates as *One VA*. In the customer view, *One VA* is defined below, followed by characterizations of the key terms used in the definition.

> *With just a single access to VA, customers receive general information about all VA benefits and services and how to apply for them, and exchange information with VA that relates to their specific eligibility determination, award determination, and receipt and use of any VA benefit or service. Subsequent to that initial access, in cases where the veteran must or desires to interact directly with a VA functional specialist (e.g., nurse, physician, vocational rehabilitation counselor, claims adjudicator, appeals lawyer), the single-access veteran service representative can quickly transfer the customer to an appropriate specialist. Customers have the option to use an automated VA self-service capability to acquire many of the same services provided by single-access veteran service representatives.*

- **Single Access**

  - Customers can call a single toll-free number and come into contact with either a voice response system or a VA veteran service representative which/who has the needed access to the appropriate systems and databases.

  - Customers can use a computer terminal from home, from a public building, or from a veteran service organization (VSO) office and gain access to the appropriate VA systems and databases.

  - Customers can visit a VA facility in person and deal with a VA professional who can access the appropriate VA systems and databases during the visit.

- **Customer**

  - For general information about VA benefits and services, the customer can be anyone.

  - For specific eligibility determination, award determination, and receipt and use of any VA benefit or service, the customer is anyone who qualifies by law for specific VA services and benefits. They are active duty personnel in the uniformed services or honorably discharged veterans and their dependents who qualify for some or all benefits and services offered by VA.

  - Anyone given legal authority by a veteran to act on his or her behalf.

- **General Information--** General information is information provided by VA for general public consumption. It relates to the infrastructure and services of VA as an organization ready to serve its customers. It is not confined to any particular veteran currently receiving benefits or services or who has made an application or claim for them.

- **Benefits and Services--** Appendix E provides a list and short description of all VA benefits and services organized by line of business. These include:

  - The benefits of all entitlement programs
  - All health care services
  - All cemetery services

- **Information Exchange Between Customer and VA--** Customers need to exchange information with VA mainly for three reasons: determination of eligibility for VA services and benefits, determination of award of a benefit or service, and the veteran's receipt and use of the benefit or service. Each is described in brief below.

  - *Eligibility Determination*--The customer completes and submits an application for a claim to VA, providing VA with all information needed to establish his or her eligibility for a particular benefit or service. VA determines eligibility and reports its decision to the customer. During the eligibility determination process, VA may have to request and receive information from the customer several times if the original application has insufficient data. Outreach efforts by VA will unilaterally notify veterans of the benefits and services they qualify for when VA already has access to the veteran's data through its own files or the files of the veteran's active duty organization (Department of Defense, Coast Guard, etc.).

  - *Award Determination*--VA collects all information it needs to determine the size and extent of the award of a particular benefit or service for which the veteran is eligible. Depending on the benefit or service, this can include the veteran's medical history while on active duty and after discharge; the veteran's current medical status; the veteran's active duty personnel records; the veteran's current marital and dependent status; the

veteran's income; and other retirement or disability benefits the veteran is receiving from non-VA government sources.

- *Receipt and Use of Benefit or Service*-- After an award of a benefit has been made to a veteran, VA begins to provide the actual benefit or service. Appendix E provides a list and description of all veterans' benefits and services provided through VA. Except for cemetery services, veteran benefits and services are delivered to the veteran over an extended period of time. During that period, many things about the veteran and the benefit or service may, and often do, change. Due to statutory constraints, the changes cause VA to adjust the benefits or services provided to the veteran. For instance, an increase or decrease in a pensioner's other income will lead to an adjustment in his or her pension amount. Some benefit programs, such as the GI Bill, require regular reporting by the veteran on the status of his/her use of the benefit. Health care involves regular interaction with the patient for each illness or injury the veteran sustains. VA files are adjusted with each interaction, both administrative and medical. In sum, there is a need for ongoing maintenance of veterans' "files" for each veteran who is a current recipient of VA benefits and services.

INTERNAL VA VIEW OF ONE VA

The *internal VA view* addresses how the different VA lines of business and external partners work together in an integrated, cooperative manner to provide VA benefits and services effectively and efficiently to the same customer: the veteran and his family. From the internal VA view, *One VA* is defined below, followed by characterizations of the key terms used in the definition.

> *For the purpose of improving the quality of service to veterans, VA business lines and their external partners maximize the sharing of communications assets, information processing assets, and customer-specific information. Together, they plan, design, develop, and implement business processes, procedures, and supporting information systems that efficiently and effectively integrate their operations, using these shared assets to enable single-access customer service.*

- **Quality of Service**-- Quality of service is normally defined from the customer's viewpoint in terms of ease of access, ease of use, timeliness, and error rate.

- **External Partners**-- An external partner is any public or private entity not part of VA that does or could exchange information with VA, or manages information on behalf of VA, for the purpose of improving service to veterans.

- **Communications Assets**-- Communications assets are hardware, software, and staff that provide the capability and capacity for all direct stakeholders and their information systems to electronically exchange all types of information reliably.

- **Information Processing Assets**-- Information processing assets are hardware, software, and technical documentation that comprise the systems that automate and integrate the business processes used by the direct stakeholders in customer service. Systems can be automated or manual.

- **Information**-- Information is all types of organized data that are used, manipulated, stored, and generated by information systems that automate and integrate the business processes used by the direct stakeholders in customer service.

- **Integrated Operations**-- To operate as *One VA* for customer service, the business operations of customer service must be integrated. Integrated operations means that two different lines of business rely on the same source for data. They not only share information, they share the assets needed to process and communicate that information. Through well planned sharing, each line of business avoids doing itself what a partner is better positioned to do for the overall goal of improving service to the customer. The same principle applies to external partners. If they are better positioned, for example, to be the authoritative source for one kind of customer service data, then they, not VA, should be that source, as long as VA can obtain access to it.

APPENDIX D

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT INTERVIEWS

A separate annex to this document (available by request from VA OIRM) entitled <u>One VA for</u> <u>Customer Service, The Information Technology Vision Executive Management Interviews</u>, provides a compendium of formal interviews conducted with senior VA personnel. The senior managers interviewed are listed in Exhibit D-1.

Exhibit D-1. Executive Management Interviews.

Interviewee	Title	Organization
Mr. Joseph Ahlering	Director, San Francisco VAMC	VHA
Mr. R. David Albinson	Chief Information Officer	VHA
Mr. Ron Aument	Director, Management & Administration	BVA
Mr. Vince Barile	Director, Operations Support	NCS
Mr. Clayton Curtis	Chief Information Systems Architect	VHA
Mr. Charles DeCoste	Director, Health Administrative Office	VHA
Ms. Celia Dollarhide	Director, Education Service	VBA
Mr. Dennis Duffy	Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning	VA
Mr. James Edwards	Director, Technology Integration Service	IRM
Ms. Nora Egan	Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning	VA
Mr. Robert Evans	Director, Austin Automation Center	VA
Mr. Bob Gardner	Director, Office of Resource Management	VBA
Dr. Thomas Garthwaite	Deputy Under Secretary for Health	VHA
Mr. Jeff Goetz	Director, Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Service	VBA
Mr. Harold Gracey	Chief of Staff	VA
Mr. W. Todd Grams	Chief Financial Officer	VHA
Mr. Harlan Hively	Director, Austin Finance Center	VA
Ms. Toni S. Hustead	Chief, Veterans Affairs Branch	OMB
Mr. Frank Lalley	Assoc Deputy Asst Secretary, Office of Telecommunications	IRM
Mr. Thomas Lastowka	Director, Philadelphia VARO&IC	VBA
Dr. Stephen L. Lemons	Under Secretary for Benefits (acting)	VBA
Mr. Jerry McRae	Director, Muskogee VARO	VBA
Ms. Kristine Moffitt	Director, Compensation and Pension Service	VBA
Mr. Don Neilson	Director, Information Management Service	IRM
Dr. Gregg Pane	Chief, Policy, Planning and Performance Office	VHA
Mr. R. Keith Pedigo	Director, Loan Guaranty Service	VBA
Mr. Newell Quinton	Chief Information Officer	VBA
Dr. Robert Roswell	Director, VISN #8	VHA
Mr. Richard Telesco	Director, Hines BDC	VBA

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Although the IT Vision of One VA does not emphasize customer service improvements in any given line of business or specific benefit or service, it is important to keep in mind the full range of benefits and services VA provides to its customers and the extent to which the customers use them. These are described in Exhibit E-1. The sources for the descriptions of each benefit and service are the 1997 edition of <u>Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents</u> and the VA World Wide Web homepage. The exhibit groups the benefits and services by line of business, of which there are seven:

- Compensation and Pension Service
- Education Service
- Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Service
- Loan Guarantee Service
- Insurance Services
- Burial Benefits Service
- Health Care Services

Exhibit E-1. List of VA Benefits and Services by Line of Business.

Line of Business	Benefit/Service	Description
Compensation and Pension Service	Disability Compensation	Monetary benefits paid to veterans disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service.
	Pension	Monetary benefits paid to veterans of low income (and 90 days or more of active military service, one day of which was during a period of war).
	Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)	Monetary payments to surviving dependents of a sponsor who dies while on active duty or dies in the line of duty from injury while on inactive duty training or dies from a disability compensable by VA.
	Death Pension	Monetary payments to surviving spouses and unmarried children of deceased veterans with wartime service; payments are based on need.
Education Service	Montgomery GI Bill (Active Duty)	A program of monetary benefits to individuals who entered active duty for the first time after June 30, 1985 (and receive an honorable discharge); requires member contribution.

Line of Business	Benefit/Service	Description
Education Service (cont.)	Montgomery GI Bill (Selected Reserve)	A program of monetary benefits for members of the reserve elements of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and for the Army and Air National Guard. To be eligible for the program, a reservist must have a six-year obligation to serve in the Selected Reserve signed after June 30, 1985.
	Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP)	Monetary benefits paid to individuals who entered active duty after Dec 31, 1976, and before July 1, 1985; requires member contribution.
	Vocational, Educational Counseling	Vocational and educational guidance and testing services offered to those eligible for a VA administered educational assistance program.
	Montgomery GI Bill Death Benefit (Survivors)	Monetary payment to survivor of sponsor entitled to educational assistance under MGIB. Amount paid is equal to military pay less education benefits paid.
	Dependents' Education	Monthly educational assistance benefits are paid to spouses and children of veterans who died or were disabled while on active duty, from a service-connected disability, MIA, or POW. Full time rate is $404/mo, lesser amounts for part-time training.
	Educational Loans (Survivors)	Loans up to $2500/year are available to spouses who qualify for educational assistance; based on financial need.
Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Service	Vocational Rehabilitation	Employment assistance, self-employment assistance, training in a VA re-habilitation facility, and college or other training available to veterans suffering from a service-connected disability. Veterans may also receive subsistence allowances, tuition, books, supplies, equipment, and transportation expenses.
Loan Guaranty Service	Home Loan Guaranties	Loan guarantees for the purchase or refinancing of new or existing homes intended as the veteran's residence.
	Home Loan Guaranties (Survivors)	Loan guarantees are also available to unremarried spouses of service member who dies from service-connected disability, or is officially listed as MIA or a POW.
Insurance Service	Servicemen's Group Life Insurance (SGLI)	$200,000 term life insurance available to members on active duty or the Ready Reserves. Premiums are deducted automatically from the members' pay.
	Veteran's Group Life Insurance (VGLI)	Renewable five-year coverage available to individuals with full-time SGLI coverage which is converted upon release from active duty or reserves.

Line of Business	Benefit/Service	Description
Insurance Service (cont.)	Service Disabled Veterans Insurance	Up to $10,000 term life insurance available to veterans with a service-connected disability (limited to those who left service after April 24, 1951).
	Veteran's Mortgage Life Insurance	Up to $90,000 in mortgage life insurance available to those veterans granted a specially adapted housing grant.
Burial Benefits Service	Burial in National Cemeteries	Burial benefits in a VA national cemetery include the gravesite, opening and closing of the grave, and perpetual care.
	Headstones and Markers	Headstones and markers are provided for the unmarked graves of veterans anywhere in the world and for eligible dependents of veterans buried in national, state veteran or military post cemeteries.
	Headstone and Markers for Memorial Plots	Plot, headstone or marker in a national cemetery to memorialize an eligible veteran whose remains are not available for burial.
	Presidential Memorial Certificates	Presidential Memorial Certificates bear the signature of the President in expressing the nation's recognition of a veteran's service and can be given to next of kin, other relatives or friends.
	Burial Flags	An American flag is provided to drape the casket of a veteran or reservist entitled to retired military pay.
	Reimbursement of Burial Expenses	Reimbursement up to $1500 of burial expenses if the veteran's death is service-connected.
Health Care Service	Category 1 Hospital and Outpatient Care	All necessary hospital and outpatient care, to the extent and in the amount for which Congress appropriates funds, is provided those veterans whose annual income and net worth is below the "means test' threshold.
	Category 2 Hospital and Outpatient Care	All necessary hospital and outpatient care, to the extent resources and facilities are available if the veteran makes a co-payment.
	Nursing Home Care	Nursing home care in VA or private home is provided for veterans who are not acutely ill and not in need of hospital care.
	Domiciliary Care	Rehabilitative and long-term health maintenance care for veterans who require minimal medical care but do not need skilled nursing services provided in nursing homes.

Line of Business	Benefit/Service	Description
Health Care Service (cont.)	Outpatient Pharmacy Services	Pharmacy services are provided free to: (1) veterans receiving medication for treatment of service-connected conditions; (2) veterans rated with 50 percent or more service-connected disability; and (3) veterans whose annual income does not exceed the maximum VA pension. Nonservice-connected veterans and veterans with a service-connection rated less than 50 percent receiving medication on an outpatient basis from VA facilities for the treatment of nonservice-connected ailments are charged $2 for each 30-day supply.
	Outpatient Dental Treatment	Outpatient dental treatment provided by VA includes examinations and the full spectrum of diagnostic, surgical, restorative and preventive techniques. Nonservice-connected veterans who are authorized outpatient dental care may be billed the applicable co-payment if their income exceeds the maximum threshold.
	Persian Gulf, Agent Orange and Ionizing Radiation	Veterans who served in the Persian Gulf War or who claim exposure to Agent Orange or atomic radiation are provided with free, comprehensive medical examinations, including base-line laboratory tests and other diagnostic tests deemed by an examining physician necessary to determine current health status. VA provides medical treatment to any Vietnam-Era veteran who, while serving in Vietnam, may have been exposed to dioxin or to a toxic substance in a herbicide or defoliant used for military purposes, for conditions related to such exposure. Health-care services are available for medical conditions possibly related to any veteran's exposure to ionizing radiation from the detonation of a nuclear device in connection with nuclear tests, or with the American occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, during the period beginning Sept. 11, 1945, and ending July 1, 1946. VA also provides priority treatment to any Persian Gulf War veteran who may have been exposed to a toxic substance or environmental hazard during the Persian Gulf War, for any disability possibly related to such exposure.
	Beneficiary Travel	Veterans are eligible for payment or reimbursement for travel costs to receive VA medical care.

Line of Business	Benefit/Service	Description
Health Care Service (cont.)	Alcohol and Drug Dependence Treatment	Veterans eligible for VA medical care may apply for substance abuse treatment. Veterans without service-connected disabilities whose incomes exceed the threshold for free medical care may be authorized treatment for alcohol and drug dependence only if the veteran agrees to make a co-payment.
	Prosthetic Services	Prosthetic services for conditions requiring hospital and outpatient care.
	Services and Aids for Blind Veterans	Blind veterans may be eligible for services at a VA medical center or for admission to a VA blind rehabilitation center or clinic. Services are available at all VA medical facilities through the Visual Impairment Services coordinator. In addition, blind veterans entitled to receive disability compensation may receive VA aids for the blind.
	Home Improvements and Structural Alterations	The Home Improvements and Structural Alterations program helps pay for home improvements necessary to provide disability access to the home. VA will pay up to $4,100 for alterations for a veteran being treated for a service-connected disability or a veteran with a disability rating of 50 percent or more. Up to $1,200 may be paid to other eligible veterans.
	Readjustment Counseling	Counseling is provided at Vet Centers to help veterans resolve war-related psychological difficulties and to help them achieve a successful post-war readjustment to civilian life. Assistance includes group, individual and family counseling, community outreach, and education. Veterans are placed with non-VA agencies if needed.
	CHAMPVA (Survivors)	Medical care for dependents and survivors of veterans if not eligible for CHAMPUS, or Medicare, Part A.
	Health Care for Homeless Veterans	Provide outreach and comprehensive medical, psychological and rehabilitation treatment programs
	Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans	Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans programs provide residential rehabilitation services.

APPENDIX F

VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

1. SOURCES USED TO DEFINE THE VOICE OF THE VA CUSTOMER

A variety of sources were used to define the "Voice of the VA Customer." These included customer surveys, focus groups, environmental scans, NCS customer comment cards, Patient Representative complaint and compliment tracking, and hotline issue reports. Each source is specifically identified in the paragraph below where a summary of its particular findings is presented.

2. SUMMARY

In summary, the veteran and veteran families want timely, accurate, convenient, and coordinated service. As these general, customer needs apply to the context of this study, veterans translate them into the following specific desires and expectations:

- Information and involvement in all matters involving personal health care and benefits 24 hour per day/7 day per week service
- One-stop service that is coordinated by a well-informed and courteous service representative or primary care health provider
- Clear and understandable explanations of all benefits and services, including eligibility requirements, application procedures, and VA policies, procedures, and decisions
- Awareness of personal eligibility for all benefits
- To be kept well informed and notified of any benefit or eligibility changes
- Timely service as a priority, especially in the areas of compensation & pension, appeals and telephone response
- Immediate status information regarding claims, check payment, appeal, anticipated completion dates, delays or changes in the claims process, approval or denial status
- Family involvement in the health care process, including being informed of all care progress and decisions
- Timely and geographically convenient specialty care
- A streamlined health care appointment and registration process
- Medical examinations that are complete and adequate to support medical care and benefit eligibility
- Uninterrupted treatment when transferred from an inpatient to outpatient status
- Rapid and direct access by VA to needed records
- Coordination of medical records, income information and military status among government agencies
- Quality control measures to assure the accuracy of gravesite inscriptions, records of earnings, income status, veteran status, and payments
- VA documents and forms that are automated and electronically accessible on an immediate basis
- A veteran identification system that eliminates need to prove and re-prove veteran status
- Acknowledgement by VA of receipt of correspondence and documents

3.   NATIONAL SURVEY OF VETERANS

"The National Survey of Veterans" was the fourth in a series of surveys conducted by the National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics under the auspices of the Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning. This survey is used to identify trends in the veteran population, to analyze veterans' prior usage and awareness of VA benefits, and to provide a current resource of data for policy analysis and future program and facility planning. A total of 11,645 veterans completed this telephone survey, which was conducted during July 8, 1993 through December 23, 1993.

Customer issues identified from this survey are as follows:

- One third of all veterans did not choose VA hospitals due to uncertainty regarding eligibility.
- VA hospitals were not selected by 22% of veterans due to perceived long waiting times.
- Lack of geographic proximity prevented 33% of veterans from being treated at VA hospital.
- Veterans cited lack of convenience, long waits, an unfamiliarity of where to go as the reasons for not obtaining needed hospital care.
- Veterans were uninformed of VA benefits and programs. This was true across all benefit programs. Over 60% of veterans were unfamiliar with the Low-Income Disability Pension and the Grant Adapted Auto/House Program. Only 50% of veterans were acquainted with the Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling benefit, and 60% were apprised of the VA Burial Program. Veteran awareness is higher regarding the following benefits: Life Insurance (79% awareness level), VA Home Guaranty (90%), and Education benefit (95%).
- The VA Loan program was not used by veterans who thought that they would not qualify (15%), that the process would take too long (21%), that they were uncertain of eligibility (22%) and/or they lacked familiarity with the application procedures (20%).
- Veterans cited the following reasons for not using the Disability Compensation Benefit: lack of program awareness (10%), uncertainty of entitlement (20%), unfamiliarity with application procedures (5%), concern that application may delay active duty release (5%), and perception of cumbersome red tape (10%).

4.   CLAIMS PROCESSING FOCUS GROUPS

"The Claims Processing Focus Groups" included a total of sixteen focus groups held from March 15 through April 6, 1995. Eight of the groups were held with the veteran, and eight groups included front-line VBA employees. One employee and one veteran focus group were held in each of the following locations: Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Sioux Falls, Winston-Salem, Muskogee, Seattle, and Phoenix. The focus groups were coordinated by VBA's Office of Resource Management Customer Surveys Team. A private contractor, Arlene Gale Selis of Strategic Systems conducted the focus groups and prepared selected transcripts.

The Claims Processing Focus Groups identified the timeliness of service and communication as the two most important issues to veterans and veteran families.

- Veterans need an explanation of the full range of benefits and services.
- Veterans would like to be informed of the status of claims.
- Veterans want to directly receive clear explanations of claims decisions.

- Veterans are frustrated with the inability to obtain sufficient information to expedite claims.
- Improved access to service by phone, mail, in person is needed.
- Veterans are frustrated with VA dependence on paper documents for decision making. They note difficulty and inconvenience in obtaining medical records. They feel that the DoD and VA and other government agencies should share documents. Veterans do not want to act as the middleman in document exchange. Veterans feel that younger veterans with more complete, recent, accessible medical records obtain quicker service. Veterans feel that the VA should already have direct access to all information needed for claims processing.
- Veterans want to understand the claims process and what to expect. They want to be given anticipated timeframes.
- The VA workload is felt to be exacerbated by lack of access to computerized files. Document access and matching are concerns. Veterans feel that the VA does a large amount of rework, especially in the areas of claims and appeal.
- Veterans want an official VA Identification System and resent having to prove veteran status.
- Veterans do not want to be responsible for obtaining or duplicating repeatedly information that they feel the VA already has in its files.
- Veterans feel that application forms should be easier to read, have larger type and only ask questions that are really relevant. They would like to have assistance provided to prevent incomplete applications resulting in unnecessary delays and frustration.
- Veterans feel that the claims process is cumbersome and should be simplified.
- Although veterans feel that the VSO is effective in obtaining information, the veteran would prefer to deal with the VA directly. Veterans do not want to go through the VSO to file claims or receive notification regarding changes in benefits or eligibility.
- Information received from the VA and all of its representatives should be consistent, comprehensive, and accurate.
- Claims delays result in veterans not having necessary income to live.
- The claims system is perceived by some veterans to be unfair. It is felt that perhaps better information might improve this.

5. FOCUS GROUP ON C&P AND EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

The Videotape of the "VA Focus Group on C&P and Educational Benefits" was recorded in Phoenix on April 6, 1995. This video directly captured the voice of the veteran and the veterans' families. This focus group was used as the basis for the development of the C&P customer survey questionnaire. It solicited perceptions and experiences from veterans regarding communications and services related to Compensation and Pension and Educational benefits.

The following customer concerns were presented during the Phoenix Focus Group:

- Veterans feel the claims processing time is too long. Although some improvement has been noted, the claims completion time remains unacceptable. Veterans are willing to help and want to know what they can do personally to expedite a claim. The timeliness, particularly in the areas of Compensation and Pension and the Appeal Process, is cited as a major customer concern.
- Veterans are troubled that delayed disability ratings may cause a veteran to miss potential federal employment opportunities.

- Medical appointments need to be coordinated better with the veteran. Appointment times and locations are often inconvenient. Missed appointments result in claims delay.
- Disability percentages should not be changed without the benefit of a repeat medical exam. Veterans should also not be rated without being examined.
- Quality medical exams must be done that accurately assess eligibility. Medical exams done at the end of a war were not detailed and should not be used for eligibility determinations.
- Veterans do not want to resubmit paperwork that should already be accessible to the VA. Proof of "honorable discharge status" and "medical records" are provided multiple times. The veteran feels that the VA has difficulty in coordinating and matching information. Many claim delays are due to the VA's inability to coordinate or obtain records. Often records cannot be located.
- Documents and information should be shared and transferred within the VA and between federal agencies. Veterans feel that the VA should use its computer systems to better advantage.
- The veteran does not want to be required to prove veteran status and actions taken.
- Veterans ask that the VA confirm document and correspondence receipt.
- Veterans want claims status information to be more easily accessible.
- Veterans want to receive reasonable time projections regarding the claims process. Veterans want to understand policies and cut off levels.
- Educational benefits should not be paid between sessions when the veteran is not in school. Veterans who are not in school should also be able to continue work/study programs.
- Veterans have the impression that 85% of all claims are automatically denied and must be appealed.
- Veterans would like to have claims handled on a "first-come, first-served basis." Claims should not be taken out of sequence when they are pulled for questions or status inquiry.
- Veterans would like the claims process to be simple and easily understood. Claims must be explained in detail to veterans.
- Veterans are requesting timely appeals after denials. One veteran noted a two year delay.
- Veterans do not like "the tone" of correspondence letters that uses phases like "according to our records" or "this is a written demand". Veterans feel that these letters put them on the defensive. Correspondence must be clear and explain the reasons for decisions.
- Medical Records must be complete and accurate and contain all necessary information to confirm the veteran's health status. Medical Records must be easily accessible and available for review.
- Veterans are concerned with inaccuracies in the claims process that result in unnecessary delays and costly rework and inconvenience. Veterans do not like to be responsible for proving errors that are often time-consuming and difficult to correct. Veterans have experienced errors in miscalculations of earnings, military status, disability status, and the number of payments made.
- Veterans feel that the VA may be short staffed. They feel that this situation may get worse with budget cuts.
- Customers feel that it takes too long to make contact with the VA by phone. "Call Back" phone calls should be done if the telephone waiting time is extensive. More VA service representatives are needed to answer phones.

- Veterans want to be treated with respect and dignity. VA employees must be understanding and courteous. Some veterans feel that their requests are not taken seriously or are handled superficially.
- Veterans repeatedly request that a personal representative within the VA handle all aspects of their case. Veterans suggest that the personal representative workloads be divided alphabetically with one representative responsible for veterans with last names starting with the letters A-C, for example.
- The VSO and DAV are helpful to the veteran in obtaining information from the VA. The veterans feel, however, that they should be able to deal with the VA directly.
- Veterans want "one-stop" service. They are frustrated by having to contact the VA multiple times to obtain necessary service and information.
- On a positive note, veterans have high praise for the VHA patient representative program, VA Rehabilitation Services, the Prescription refill service. Veterans have felt that VHA clinical staffs have been caring, responsive and supportive of the veteran and the veteran's family.
- Veterans want timely and direct notification of changes in benefits and eligibility requirements.
- Veterans and veterans families request full explanations of the full range of VA benefits and services. TAP programs, correspondence, and booklets have been helpful.
- Veterans ask that VA eliminate backlogs and decrease appeal-waiting times. Veterans feel that the membership of the Appeals Board may be too small and should be increased. Veterans would like the appeal process to be simplified and feel that too many board meetings are needed to make decisions.
- Veterans want to be kept informed of decisions that impact them. They are particularly interested in obtaining claims status information.
- The VA should automatically re-file a request to increase the veteran's pension if the veteran is admitted to the VHA for a condition that would warrant this.
- Veterans feel that "face-to-face" service is taken more seriously and is better than telephone or correspondence service.
- Veterans suggest that benefit application be done at the time that the veteran is discharged from active duty.

6. NCS FOCUS GROUPS

The National Cemetery System (NCS) conducted customer focus groups in FY 1996. The purpose of these focus groups was to collect voluntary, first person, anecdotal data that would assist the organization in further assessing its performance. NCS convened focus groups that included relatives of those recently buried in national cemeteries, funeral directors, and members of various veteran organizations. These sessions provided a record of the experiences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of people who have recent or on-going contact with the national cemeteries. The customer service philosophy of the NCS is outlined in the video entitled "A Sacred Trust." Visitors to national cemeteries complete customer comment cards, which outline customer concerns and comments. This information has been considered in this report.

In regard to the National Cemetery System, the following service enhancements are needed:

- The VA must ensure the quality and timeliness of headstones, markers, and Presidential Memorial Certificates.
- Veterans need to be aware of National Cemetery System services, eligibility, and access.
- Veterans would like burial options within a reasonable distance of their residence.

7.   LOAN GUARANTEE CUSTOMER SURVEYS

The VA Loan Guarantee Program administers two customer surveys: (1) a survey of veterans who recently obtained a VA-guaranteed home loan and (2) a survey of lenders who participate in the VA home loan program. VA regional offices nationwide are sending surveys to five percent of all veterans receiving a guaranteed home loan, excluding "Interest Rate Reduction Refinancing Loans."

8.   INSURANCE SERVICE CUSTOMER SURVEYS

The Regional Office and Insurance Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania routinely conducts the "Policyholders Services Customer Survey" and the "Insurance Claims Division (ICD) Customer Service Survey." In general, the insurance center customers are more satisfied than other VA service customers. Much of this satisfaction is linked to the fact that general service turnaround times are significantly better. Many veterans voiced satisfaction with service received.

Policyholders Services Customer surveys demonstrated that more than 85% of all veterans were satisfied with all aspects Policyholders Service. A small percentage of veterans were dissatisfied with the following services: difficulty in contacting a VA representative by phone (14%), overall quality of telephone service (13%), untimely reply from VA (13%), questions were not fully answered (9%), slow follow-up action (7%), follow-up service was not done accurately (7%), difficulty in obtaining loan application (6%), unclear instructions on the cash surrender form (4%), correspondence was not understandable (4%), overall correspondence needs improvement (4%).

Other customer concerns identified by the Policyholders Service Customers survey are as follows:

- Veterans are concerned that telephone responses have not always matched the information in letters.
- Veterans are frustrated by having to make multiple contacts with the VA before action is taken. Veterans do not like to have to "call back" and are annoyed when the VA does not return their calls.
- Veterans are asking that the VA decrease the check waiting times.
- Veterans are concerned that the disability appeal hearing may not always be fair. They ask that the appeal process be investigated.
- Veterans ask that the service representative accuracy be improved.

The ICD Customer Service Survey results also indicate more than an 85% satisfaction rate in all areas. A small percentage of veterans were dissatisfied with the following services: unclear instructions on claims forms (10%), burdensome paperwork requirements (14%), letters were not understandable (10%), phone calls were not understandable (5%), the overall disability insurance

benefits service needs improvement (5%), untimely claims checks (4%), insurance application forms are not easy to obtain (5%), phone calls regarding claims were not courteous (5%) or not understandable (5%), insurance application forms were not easy to obtain (5%), unclear instructions on application forms (5%), difficulty in reporting a missing check (13%), unclear letters regarding missing checks (10%), discourteous missing check letters (5%), phone calls regarding missing checks were not clear (6%) or were not courteous (6%), untimely replacement checks (14%), the missed check service in general needs improvement (9%), untimely receipt of beneficiary designation forms (3%), and unclear instructions on the designation form (3%).

Other customer concerns identified by the Policyholders Services Customer survey are as follows:

- Veterans do not like to wait to receive an insurance premium refund.
- Veterans would like to receive policies on time.
- The customer would like VA to respond to voice mail inquiries.
- Veterans are requesting a direct deposit option.
- Veterans are demanding more timely receipt of replacement checks.
- Veterans want to receive a summary of life insurance on a yearly basis.
- The VA is asked to improve its "1-800" telephone response and to eliminate "on hold" delays.
- VA is asked to improve the time required from application to actual check receipt.
- Veterans ask that the disability appeal process be investigated and simplified.

9.   1996 SURVEY OF VETERANS' SATISFACTION WITH THE COMPENSATION AND PENSION CLAIMS PROCESS

The "VA Focus Group on C&P and Educational Benefits," a survey questionnaire, was used as the basis for the "1996 Survey of Veterans' Satisfaction with the Compensation and Pension Claims Process." The following customer expectations and issues were identified via this survey:

- The C&P application form needs to be clear with easily understood instructions. It must be easy to read and simple to complete with limited time investment.
- Veterans want easily obtained status information at all stages of the claims process.
- The customer would like acknowledgment of receipt of the claims application and to be kept informed of anticipated delays or problems in the claims process.
- Eligibility requirements and information regarding the claims process are requested by the veteran including the time required to complete a claim, and document requirements needed to complete the claim (i.e. medical records, civilian records, income status information).
- Information about benefits and services are important to the customer.
- Veterans want claims to be processed in a timely fashion.
- Veterans are requesting immediate access to medical records to support the claim.
- Veterans do not want to submit documents more than once.
- Medical exams must be scheduled in a time and place convenient to the veteran. Medical exams must be complete and accurate to sufficiently support the claim. The veteran does not want the inconvenience or delay of a repeat medical exam.

- The veteran and the families of veterans are adamant in their request for a specific VA representative to handle the entire claims process.
- Although the veteran has been well assisted by the VSO or state or county veteran services offices, the veteran prefers to obtain immediate, direct service from the VA without having to do this.
- Veterans contact the VA by phone or in person to obtain pre-filing information, to apply for benefits, to obtain claims status information, to provide requested information to the VA, or to request clarification of a VA letter. Veterans do not want to experience delays in contacting the VA by phone. They expect VA personnel to be courteous and helpful and that the information they provide be complete and accurate.
- Veterans are frustrated by having to contact VA more than once about the same question or problem.
- VA correspondence must be easy to understand.
- Some veterans want written confirmation of a phone call or interview for their personal file at home.
- Claims must be completed in a timely fashion. The veteran must be notified immediately of the approval or denial of a claim. The approval/denial letter must contain the reason for the decision.
- VA employees must be helpful and willing to answer all questions and seriously address all veteran concerns or complaints.
- Claims decisions must be fair. Denied claims must be explained.
- The veteran needs to understand the claims appeal process and procedures.

10. PATIENT REPRESENTATIVE TRACKING SYSTEM

Information contained in the Patient Representative Tracking System Database was reviewed. A formal report of this information is to be published and available in October of 1997. This database includes all compliments and complaints received by patient representatives from VHA patients and their families.

11. OIG HOTLINE

During FY 1996, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Hotline received 19,000 contacts. The majority of these contacts were from veterans and their families seeking information concerning health care and other VA benefits. Many veterans contacted the hotline for disability and pension claims status information. The Hotline opened 550 formal cases during FY 1996. Most of these Hotline cases involved allegations of poor medical care, excessive delays in claims processing, mismanagement, abuse of government facilities and equipment, and inappropriate expenditures. 26% of the 540 Hotline cases that were closed during the year had substantiated allegations.